

Narratives of Experience in Education:  
Living and Working Through Poverty in a Rural Community

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Submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Education

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## **Abstract**

In this study, I use my own experiences in education as a former elementary student, research assistant, and as a current secondary school teacher, to examine how living in a marginalised rural community challenged by poverty affected my formal education. The purpose of this study was to use stories to: (a) explore my formative elementary education growing up in a community that was experiencing poverty, and; (b) to examine the impact and implications of these experiences for me as a teacher and researcher considering the topic of poverty and education.

This study used narrative inquiry to explore stories of education, focusing on experiences living and working in a rural community. My role in the study was both as participant and researcher as I investigate, through story, how I was raised in a marginalised, rural community faced with challenges of poverty and how I relate to my current role as a teacher working in a similar, rural high school. My own experiences and reflections form the basis of the study, but I used the contributions of secondary participants to offer alternative perspective of my interpretation of events. Participants in this study were asked to write about and/or retell their lived stories of working in areas affected by challenging circumstances.

From my stories and those of secondary participants, three themes were explored: student authorship, teaching practice, and community involvement. An examination of these themes through commonplaces of place, sociality and time (Connelly and Clandinin, 2006) provide a context for other educators and researchers to consider or reconsider teaching practices in school communities affected by poverty.

## **Acknowledgement**

I would like to thank Dr. Ciuffetelli Parker, who has been both a friend and mentor to me over the past five years – first when I was a research assistant, and later as she encouraged me to pursue my research interests. Without her, I know this project would not be of the calibre that it is today. I thank her for her dedication, encouragement, and commitment throughout this process.

Secondly, I would like to thank my family for their ongoing support throughout my educational career. I learned to value education from a very early age, and for that I am forever grateful.

Finally, to my husband, Mike. Thank you for your support, encouragement and patience as I have worked through this process. Thank you for being with me on every step of this journey. You are amazing.

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## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY**

I was raised in a rural, farming community in south-western Ontario. My parents were dairy farmers, and not only was it their living, it was also our way of life. Everything in our daily lives, and daily routines revolved around the farm including what we ate, when we ate, where and when we vacationed, and how we spent our time. My siblings and I were expected to assist our parents in the day-to-day activities of the farm; however I'll be the first to admit my brothers have played a much larger role in that than I have. As a child, I felt ashamed and embarrassed because I thought my parents didn't have real jobs. The TV presented a working person as someone who left the house every day at 8am with a briefcase and returned in the evening. Being self-employed farmers my parents didn't leave our farm, and somehow I felt this made us second-class citizens. The community in which I was raised is one of traditional values, where people help one another. I have seen photos of the barn raising my neighbours had in the 1930s, where the entire community came together to build a barn in one day. The biblical teachings we learned in church are carried out everyday where people help their neighbours, and work together.

The village where I went to elementary school was established in the 1850s, when the town was built around a point in the river where a mill could be established (Marsh, 1931, p. 76). Like its neighbouring towns, the majority of the town's residents were German immigrants from Prussia and other Germanic states. Walks through the graveyards attest to the histories of these first immigrants, with many early grave markers written in German. My ancestors

first appear on the census in the 1880s and generations have remained in the area ever since.

In 1964, my father and his fellow students abandoned their one room school houses and moved to the new school building. He was in Grade 1 at the time. Approximately 20 years later, I began my own formal education at the same school. It is a small school, with fewer than 200 students – approximately one class per grade. About half of the students in my class came from farming families, the other students lived in town. In 1986 I began my own educational journey. During the time I was in elementary school, 1986-1995, the local income for the school catchment was approximately \$6,000 lower than the provincial average and \$1,500 lower than the county average. The unemployment rate was almost 9%, about 1% above the provincial average (Bluewater District School Board, 2003). Although I always felt safe and cared for, I knew several people in my community lived in need. (Reflective Writing, June 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2010)

The person I am today was built from the foundation of the community where I grew up. This small, rural community in south-western Ontario provided me with an ancestral history, but a limited future in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. I knew that if I wanted to live my life, as I do today, I needed to leave this community to attend university, to get a degree, and to become a professional.

I used narrative inquiry to explore stories of living and working in a rural community, focusing on experiences of education. My role in the study was both as participant and researcher, as I investigated through story, how I was raised in a community faced with challenges of poverty and how I relate to my current role as a

teacher working in a similar, rural high school. I gathered experiences through stories, from people who have influenced my personal, educational, and professional life and use their experiences to validate and contrast my own. This study has helped me to understand myself as a teacher and provided insights to improve my own professional practice and to understand the conditions that face students living in challenging circumstances in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **Research Issue**

In 2007, the Elementary Teacher's Federation of Ontario commissioned a study to explore success stories of Ontario elementary schools facing challenging circumstances, with a particular focus on poverty and education (Ciuffetelli Parker & Flessa, 2011). Serendipitously, I was hired as the research assistant to Dr. Ciuffetelli Parker throughout this research project. Over the course of almost three years, I followed Dr. Ciuffetelli Parker through this research process, and the subsequent impact study (Ciuffetelli Parker, 2010b, 2010c) that was an extension due to the success of the initial project (Ciuffetelli Parker & Flessa, 2011).

As we travelled together for site visits to several elementary schools in Ontario, both in rural and urban areas, I began to reflect on my own childhood educational experiences. The school sites we visited were selected by the researchers as being marginalised, specifically regarding poverty. Part of my role as the research assistant was to participate in focus groups with parents, administrators, and teachers at these schools. We visited five urban schools in two of the biggest cities in Ontario in the initial poverty project, as well as three more urban schools and two rural schools in the subsequent impact study. These schools ranged from small (less than 150 students) to



large (more than 600), servicing several ages of students from Kindergarten to Grade 3, or Kindergarten to Grade 8. Some of the schools served the community as a hub of activity during school hours and beyond, while other schools played more traditional school roles focusing on academics, school sports, and extracurricular activities.

The stories the participants told of their community illuminated memories of my formative elementary education, and I began to relate to the experiences that were being shared. I began to reflect and wonder whether or not the community where I grew up was a community challenged by poverty, and whether I grew up in a community with challenging circumstances to which, as a child, I was unaware.

As I listened to the stories of teachers, administrators, and parents during the Ciuffetelli Parker and Flessa study (2011), several themes emerged from their conversations that I could relate to my elementary school experience. I began to wonder about the challenges experienced by my hometown that as a child perhaps my parents sheltered me from, or I was too self-absorbed in my own childhood to notice. These reflections led to my desire to explore critical incidents from my childhood and dig deeper to find meaning and understanding in order to reconcile these events with my current role as a teacher. Studying rural lived experiences and challenges allow me to better know myself as an educator, and better understand communities affected by poverty in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In my current role as a secondary school teacher, I work in a school that experiences several challenges, including racial tensions, poverty, and a lack of academic success. There are several similarities to the schools I attended as a child, even though they are separated by hundreds of kilometres. I am currently employed at a secondary

school in south-western Ontario, with approximately 500 students. The community from which the students are drawn is very much divided, both financially and socially. There is division in economic status, which often seems to correlate with academic achievement or academic failure. The high academic-achieving students at this school are almost always supported by a stable family life, with two parents in professional careers – they are predominantly white. The students who struggle both academically and socially often carry burdens of dismal home lives, abuse, and struggle.

### **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this study was to use stories to explore my formative elementary education, growing up in a community that was experiencing poverty and the impact and implications of these experiences for me as a teacher and researcher engaged in education in areas affected by poverty. My own experiences and reflections formed the basis of the study, but I used the contributions of secondary participants to validate and contradict my interpretation of events. Drawing upon the advice of Connelly and Clandinin (2006), I asked other participants to tell their lived stories of living and working in areas affected by challenging circumstances. People are both living their stories in an ongoing experiential text and telling their stories in words as they reflect upon life and explain themselves to others (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). Participants included one of my elementary school teachers, an elementary school classmate, and my mother. These participants added depth and breadth to the narrative unity of my inquiry. The stories garnered from these participants provided me with *resonance* (Conle, 1996), a way of seeing one experience in terms of another, or a way of developing self through interactions with others. For educators, resonance is further explained by Conle (1996),

“as metaphors for human interactions, these notions suggest an educational process—namely a development of self through interactions with others at an intimate level” (p. 299). In order to better understand the students and community with whom I am working, I needed to first better understand myself.

### **Statement of the Research Problem**

This project used a narrative inquiry approach to collect stories from participants, including myself. The following narrative fragment describes a memory from my very early childhood; I often wonder whether this is a true memory or something my mind has created, knowing that I should remember this event.

The year is 1983, and I am 2 years old. I can see myself standing with my back to the house, holding someone’s hand – probably my mother’s. Looking back, I feel like a third-party observer, rather than someone who experienced it first hand. I don’t particularly remember what I was looking at, but I remember feeling the tension in the air and the stress of everyone around me. Stories of this day would be told time and time again, so much so that at times I almost believe I can remember the event itself. (Personal Recollection, September 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2010)

In much the same way as the story at the beginning of this chapter paints a picture of the history of my community; I elicited stories from participants that describe educational experiences in this community, from other perspectives. As a participant I shared stories that I have not shared before—although, many of the events were shared with others at the time, I am not sure whether or not they were seen as significant by those standing with me. I share my stories of pivotal events, as I remember them, as I am now.

I have a very nice photo of myself from that day. My aunt took me to Zellers to get my picture taken—probably to get me out of my mom’s hair. I will have to ask her if it was prearranged, or coincidentally lucky that I was busy for most of the day. That day, my parents barn burnt down, many animals were lost. In the span of a few short hours, my parents lives changed forever—suddenly they had nothing. (Personal Recollection, September 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2010)

I shared my stories with the other participants and asked them to share similar stories with me. The relational knowing, the understanding and knowledge gained through the relationships and stories, (Hollingsworth, Dybdahl, & Minarik, 1993) provide insights from which the final analysis is drawn. Griffin, Ciuffetelli Parker and Kitchen (2010) tell us that the nature of knowledge is socially constructed, and understanding this is key in understanding the relational study of experience.

I remember the day in 2003 when my mom called me at university to let me know it had happened again. Most farmers never experience the loss that comes with a barn fire, yet it happened to my parents twice. It was devastating to watch my parents experience such loss and be helpless. However, from the ashes of the barn grew the support of the entire community. Neighbours took in our livestock and fed them from their own crops. Other people brought food to lighten the workload for my mom. The neighbours held a Benefit Dance purposed solely to help fund the re-build. I have never appreciated our community as I did at that time—and I finally came to understand why my parents were always so quick to help their neighbours out whenever they could—even if it was extremely inconvenient for them.

I have always felt that it is important to live in the moment and appreciate what we have—perhaps because I know through experience that everything can be gone in an instant. (Personal Reflection, September 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2010)

I have experienced relational knowing (Hollingsworth et al., 1993) through the stories my family has lived in community with others. As Hollingsworth et al. (1993) explain, relational knowing describes relationship as a critical component for making meaning out of the storied lives of teachers and students. These relationships are explored by listening and telling *stories of school* and *school stories* (Clandinin & Connelly, 1996). As Craig (1999) describes, “School stories are stories people tell about schools while stories of school are the plot lines schools are given” (p. 399). In later writing, Craig (2011) further describes school stories as “the ongoing narrative constructions of school composed by teachers, principals, children, and family members, while stories of school are outsider constructions of what the school is or should be all about” (p. 24). This study also used *community stories* and *parent stories* due to the nature of relationships between the various participants, including myself, while seeking out our *relational knowing*.

“Stories of community are narratives told about communities, while community stories—which necessarily would include parent stories—stories of parents—are those narratives lived and told, and re-lived and re-told, by community members” (Craig, 2009). Parent stories are stories of parents sharing stories of their children and their children’s lives, and stories of themselves and their lives (Pushor, 2001).

Is the reliving and retelling (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) of my childhood formative education different in present day, with my newly lived experience as a beginning teacher? I have experienced education as a student and child, as a young adult,

as a graduate student, and research assistant, and now as a beginning teacher. I am still a student and a teacher. Recently, I have also become more comfortable seeing myself as a researcher. This project helped me to explore the puzzle of my own multiplicity. I wondered how these roles I play influence my professional practice? During this project I “engage participants through *telling* stories” (Clandinin, 2006, p. 47) and shared with the participants some of the experiences that have shaped who I am as a person, as well as who I am as a professional. By retelling and reliving these stories with participants, I hope to find ways to inquire into the participants’ own stories and experiences, and walk alongside participants in living out their own stories (Clandinin, 2006).

### **Research Question**

Specifically, my research question was: what stories emerge from my childhood and from other participants that inform my own teaching, specifically related to my current teaching position? How do these stories inform my own “stories of school and school stories” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Connelly & Clandinin, 2006)?

### **Rationale for the Study**

Due to the recent economic downturn, poverty in Ontario continues to increase (Campaign 2000, 2010). I believe important implications can be learned from my experiences through the public education system in a community dealing with poverty. In the context of current education in Ontario, the Ministry of Education strives to support all students to succeed:

The Ontario government is committed to enabling all students to reach their potential, and to succeed. Our challenge is that every student is unique and each

must have opportunities to achieve success according to his or her own interests, abilities, and goals. (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010a, p. 1)

This project looks from the vantage point of story and narrative to review the context of education in Ontario schools in the late 1980s through to present in order to determine whether policy has changed to support children affected by poverty in schools and explore present ideas for reform. This study could lead to discussion and change in the educational community by providing a comprehensive description of the attitudes, beliefs, and practices in education that are successfully working with students and communities affected by poverty (Ciuffetelli Parker & Flessa, 2011). Additionally, through the examination of Ministry policy reports as they relate to socio-economic status and whether such documents support students and teachers working in those circumstances, this study could provide insights for strategies and future work in this area.

The school where I work has a large number of First Nations students. This is in stark contrast to the community where I was raised, where the students were considered white working poor. The school where I work is located next to one of the largest First Nations communities in the province, and these students make up approximately 40% of the student body. Students who live on the reserve attend elementary schools there, but attend our public high school in a nearby town. At my school, this population often presents additional barriers that teachers and staff are trying to work through. Ball (2004) identifies one of the issues educators deal with on a daily basis, “Education that is conceptualized, vetted, and delivered predominantly by academics and professionals of European descent. This kind of training can shatter Indigenous students’ sense of cultural

pride and seriously challenge their confidence in the validity of the cultural knowledge that they bring to the training” (p. 457). It is important to understand that this project is not about challenges and educational experiences of Aboriginal students but, rather this contextual information about my current teaching location is important to understanding my experience with the students marginalised by poverty and discrimination.

I used narrative inquiry to explore stories and shared experiences of my formative elementary education, focusing on challenging circumstances that were part of my educative experience growing up in a rural farming community and are part of my present-day work as a teacher in a similar community. People shape their daily lives by stories of who they are and as they interpret their past in terms of these stories (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 477). The stories that emerge from my own reflections, as well as those who experienced my childhood with me helped me to understand the impact my life chronicle has had on me as a person and teacher, and the significance my narrative experiences have had on my professional practice.

“*Belonging* is indisputably a key indicator for success in our human condition” (Ciuffetelli Parker, 2010d, p. 1253). By participating in this study, participants know they belong to the community, and that their insights are valued. Participants in this study could also benefit from professional development of shared knowledge, and practice of success. Education and educational studies are a form of experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000)—the chance to share these experiences can potentially lead to improved professional practice. Participants who are no longer actively engaged in education and do not seek to improve their professional practice may benefit through



reflecting on these stories of their past, and the implications they have on their current lives, as I have.

### **Scope and Limitations of the Study**

The parameters of the study focus on and around experiences of teachers and former students at a rural Ontario public school. As a student of this school for nine years, Kindergarten through Grade 8, my memories provide preconceived notions of the school and the community that surrounds it. Narrative inquiries are always strongly autobiographical. Researcher's interests come out of their own narratives of experience and shape their narrative inquiry plotlines (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). None of the participants of the study currently attend or work at the school around which this study is based. The stories that arose focused on past events, but implications for the future can be made. The economic story of the community has not changed, and the findings of this study could help others in similar communities and educational contexts.

This project uses *narrative inquiry* as the method, while the phenomenon being studied is *story* (Ciuffetelli Parker, 2004). This method allows me to study experiences as storytelling or narrative. This study does not produce quantitative data. Rather, this narrative research links interpretations and phenomena that are grounded in "the context of assumptions... with deliberate logic" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1991). For narrative inquirers, it is crucial to be able to articulate a relationship between one's personal interests and sense of significance and larger social concerns expressed in the works and lives of others (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

## **Overview of the Study**

Through this chapter, I have introduced myself as a student, teacher, and researcher, and provided a glimpse into aspects of my childhood, specifically the rural community where I was raised. I have also provided information on experiences I had while working as a research assistant, which led directly to this project. In addition, I have introduced the methodology, research issue, and participants involved in this study.

In Chapter Two, I review existing literature that provides further context for this study. Specific topics discussed include poverty and education, narrative inquiry, policy reform documents, use of narrative inquiry methods by teachers, and issues facing Aboriginal students in Canada.

Chapter Three outlines the methodology I used for this study, with a specific focus on narrative inquiry. This chapter also introduces the participants of the study, giving reasons for why they were chosen, as well as their relationship with me. The chapter goes further to describe data collection procedures, analysis, and ethical considerations.

The results of the study are presented in Chapter Four using a combination of stories as shared by participants as well as data from the transcripts of the interviews. The data have been systematically reviewed and analysed for themes, which are also outlined in this chapter.

Chapter Five presents a summary of the project, as well as a discussion of the results and implications for future research. Further, Chapter Five extrapolates on the themes presented in Chapter Four and the meaning these themes have for me as a teacher.

## **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

In Chapter Two I reviewed existing literature in order to provide a context for the study. This chapter provides information on poverty and education, the rural experience and education, educational policy development and reform, narrative inquiry, and how practising teachers use the narrative inquiry method. In Chapter Three I expand on the methodology of narrative inquiry to describe the methods undertaken in this research.

### **Poverty and Education**

One out of every ten children in Canada lives in poverty (Campaign 2000, 2009). However, there is very little Canadian educational research about the experiences of people living and working in poverty in Canada. Educators tend to be members of the middle and upper class and often carry stereotypes about people living in poverty. Flessa (2006) summarises it well when he states, “It is not a surprise to learn that all traditional measures of school success systematically rank students from poor families lower than their wealthier peers” (p. 2).

In Ontario, 43% of all children in Canada live in poverty (Campaign 2000, 2008). Nationally, statistics are staggering. Ontario is Canada’s largest province, and has some of the most dire poverty issues in Canada. According to Campaign 2000 (2008): one in eight children in Ontario live in poverty when income is measured after taxes; 70% of all low-income children live in families with at least one parent working part time or full time; the average two-parent low-income family lives \$10,000 below the poverty line; and poverty rates for children in Aboriginal, racialized, new immigrant, and lone mother-led families are at least double the average rate.

Students living in poverty are disadvantaged in many aspects of their lives, including their academic lives. For educators, it sometimes is difficult to see which students are dealing with this type of disadvantage—often it is hidden from plain sight and in busy professional lives it is simply overlooked. Other times, poverty can be plainly seen but is ignored because educators don't know what to do to help or choose not to get involved. Rothman (2007) says, "Poverty and income inequality are major barriers to the academic achievement and the healthy development of children, the cohesion of our communities, and ultimately, to the social and economic well-being of Canada" (p. 49). Levin (2007) adds, "Socioeconomic status remains the most powerful single influence on students' educational and other life outcomes" (p. 75). There are no easy solutions, and the struggles of teachers and educators are seemingly endless and, as Levin cautions, "For educators working in high-poverty communities, finding an appropriate stance toward poverty and the achievement gap can be difficult" (Levin, 2007, p. 76). As time goes on, children who grow up in poverty continue to face economic challenges. "Rising costs of post-secondary education are a formidable barrier to low-income students" (Campaign 2000, 2009, p. 1).

Epstein and Sanders (2006) state that "most teachers and administrators are educated to think of themselves as individual leaders of classrooms, schools, or districts, with little attention to the importance of teamwork and collaborations with parents, community partners, and others interested in students' success in school" (p. 82). Current teacher education programmes do not provide teacher candidates with adequate strategies to be successful in schools affected by poverty. Teaching positions are not easy to obtain.

In 2006, the excess of new teachers beyond retirement needs had reached 7,000 annually. This large annual oversupply means diminished early careers for many new Ontario teacher education graduates as well as others who move to Ontario and attempt to re-establish their teaching careers here. (Ontario College of Teachers, 2007, p. 2)

The oversupply of teachers that the Ontario College of Teachers cites above points to the reason why many teachers are forced to work, if they can find any teaching positions at all, in areas not in the catchment area where they themselves live and in communities where demographics may be unfamiliar to their lived experiences. Many teachers work in areas different from where they live, and work in situations in which they are unfamiliar. Hoping to find answers to their teaching needs, and simple techniques to achieve success with their students, many educators turn to what on the surface appears to be solid, research-based advice. However, Ciuffetelli and Flessa (2011) caution:

Within the published literature there are many attempts to explain why the work in high poverty schools is challenging; in the drive to provide answers and remedies, some of this literature deprofessionalizes teachers' work by steering them away from inquiry about their practice and towards off-the-shelf explanations and remedies. (p. 21)

One example of an off-the-shelf remedy is provided in the work of Ruby Payne (Payne, 1996; Payne, DeVol, & Dreussi Smith, 2001). Many school boards in Ontario and across the country have used her American keynote speaking engagements and books as a guide to help teachers deal with students living in poverty. However, the basis for Payne's work comes from a deficit model of thinking; that is, where "students who struggle or fail

in school do so because of their own internal deficits or deficiencies” (Sato & Lensmire, 2009). She argues that these deficiencies mainly come about as personal and social skills that people in poverty do not understand, and have never been taught. As a result, her model assumes these deficiencies perpetuate the cycle of poverty from one generation to the next.

Bomer, Dworin, May, and Semingson (2008) critique Payne’s work, claiming that she is not a researcher on the topic of poverty. Her claims are based on her own anecdotal experiences, and yet she sells her experiences as having widespread applicability to everyone who works with people living in poverty. Bomer et al. (2008) state “Payne refers to her claims as data, although she has conducted no actual research” (p. 2496). She evokes stereotypes of people living in poverty such as “for many individuals who live in poverty, jail is a part of their lives on a fairly regular basis” and “being able to physically fight or have someone who is willing to fight for you is important to survive in poverty” (Payne, 1996, p. 22, 41). She sees poverty as a culture (Payne, 1996), having different cultural norms including language, tradition, and experiences than those in the middle-classes. In her book *Bridges Out of Poverty* Payne et al. (2001) identify key points to consider, including:

- *An individual brings with him/her the hidden rules of the class in which he/she was raised.* Even though the income of the individual may rise significantly, many of the patterns of thought, social interaction, cognitive strategies, etc., remain with the individual.

- *Schools and businesses operate from middle-class norms and use the hidden rules of middle-class. These norms and hidden rules are not directly taught in schools or in businesses.*
- *For our clients to be successful, we must understand their hidden rules and teach them the rules that will make them successful at school, at work, and in the community.*
- *We can neither excuse persons from poverty nor scold them for not knowing; as professionals we must teach them and provide support, insistence, and expectations.* (Payne et al., 2001, p. 11)

Payne uses paternalism and stereotyping to sell her theories. Bomer et al. (2008) caution that she “pathologizes the culture or rules of the poor and valorizes the culture or rules of the middle-class” (p. 2503). Middle-class values prevail in schools; Payne argues, and so students from poverty cannot succeed academically without learning middle-class world views, language patterns, and behaviour norms (Payne, 1996). One of the foundations for her work is that people living in poverty need to be taught how to be successful in a middle-class society and, because of their internal deficiencies, they are not able to be successful on their own. Payne often talks about the hidden rules of the classes. In her book, she specifies:

Hidden rules are about the unspoken understandings that cue the members of the group that this individual does or does not fit. For example, three of the hidden rules in poverty are the following: The noise level is high (the TV is always on, and everyone may talk at once), the most important information is non-verbal, and

one of the main values of an individual to the group is an ability to entertain.

(Payne et al., 2001, p. 16)

Payne believes that educators must explicitly teach students who come from poverty about these hidden rules, as well as how to successfully navigate a middle-class environment in order for them to be successful. Although in many communities teaching middle-class hidden rules may help children and families living in poverty, the view of doing unto rather than working with families living in challenging circumstances can be considered a deficit model of thinking, and it certainly raises the question of equity in school systems and communities.

Payne's work has been strongly criticised in academia. One of the main criticisms is described by Gorski (2008), "Payne (1996) exploits virtually every common stereotype of economically disadvantaged people: bad parenting, violent tendencies, criminality, promiscuity, and questionable morality" (p. 136). She does not discuss negative aspects of the middle-class, or emphasise common deviant or criminal activities they might commit. Gorski (2008) continues with "She renders the average person in poverty—the drug-free, nonviolent, hard-working, education-valuing, non-criminal, responsible person—invisible" (p. 139). By omitting positive examples of people living in poverty, as well as negative examples of people in the middle-class, Payne encourages educators to think of themselves as superior to the students and families with whom they work. The danger here is that, while teachers hear her work and read her books, they might relate to the stories of poverty shared in her books. They begin to look for, and find examples in their own classrooms that reflect the concepts presented by Payne.



“[Teachers] relate to the hidden rules because the rules paint them as moralistically and intellectually superior to people in poverty” (Gorski, 2008, p. 144).

Why is Payne's work so attractive to educators? She provides simple answers for difficult situations. “[Teachers] felt that Payne’s book was able to offer tangible answers to their questions about teaching and to solve many of the problems our field currently faces” (Smiley & Helfenbein, 2011, p. 9). “Payne presents poverty as something handed from parents to children through a kind of cultural heritability that is the responsibility of the school to break” (Bomer et al., 2008, p. 2507) and then she outlines steps for teachers to follow in order to fix the students and help them to achieve in a middle-class world. “To imagine that we can create a list of strategies and assign them to whole groups of children because of who their parents are or where they live is a gross oversimplification of what it means to teach or to be a teacher” (Sato & Lensmire, 2009, p. 370).

Alternatively, there are many successful teachers working in schools challenged by poverty. These teachers have developed their own methods of teaching students in ways that work and respect families without deficit models of thinking. Ciuffetelli Parker and Flessa (2011) identify several strategies that work in schools affected by poverty, including teacher coaching and mentoring, teacher leadership and shared expertise, and collaboration between teachers. “Rather than dwelling on children’s perceived deficits, we believe teachers should be encouraged to focus instead on children’s competence as cultural and intellectual people” (Sato & Lensmire, 2009, p. 366). Successful teachers look at children and see what is there, rather than what is missing (Flessa, 2006; Valencia, 1997).

Teachers working in schools where students and families live in poverty must often work in ways different from their counterparts in more affluent neighbourhoods. Some teachers are able to develop strategies that lead to student success and academic achievement; others do not. Such strategies include a focus on instruction, teaching excellence, and high quality collaboration (Ciuffetelli Parker, Flessa, Becker, & Gallagher-McKay, 2009). When these strategies are not employed, it is the students who suffer further setbacks compared to their more affluent peers. In order for teachers to be successful, Sato and Lensmire (2009) recognise that complex pedagogy is needed that attends to students' home lives, their everyday lived experiences, and the relationship of understanding built between the teacher and students. Research suggests that certain styles of teaching may be more successful than others in helping students succeed.

Teaching in learner-centered ways seems to be especially difficult in schools where the stresses of poverty are greatest. There, a narrow emphasis on basic competencies seems to work against proceeding with the learner's strengths, needs, and interests in mind. (O'Connell Rust, 1999, p. 378)

There are great things happening in many schools, and these accomplishments need to be recognised. The challenge is how to recognise the important work being done in many places while still insisting that more is needed (Levin, 2006). It is important to pay greater attention to the ways these strategies are affecting students, educators, administrators, parents, and communities. Story is an important tool in understanding the complexity of poverty and schooling.

### **The Rural Experience and Education**

Living in a rural community presents a different life experience than for those living in an urban context. Counter to romantic depictions of rural life as a simpler, less pressured environment, it is now recognised that rural families face unique stressors that have as much effect on adolescent functioning as urban stressors of crowding, noise, and violence. “Such stress may include geographic isolation, loneliness, barriers to health services, and economic instability attributable to heavy reliance on primary industries (e.g., agriculture, mining, fishing)” (Elgar, Arlett, & Groves, 2003, p. 576). These unique stressors are often coupled with a sense of loss. Kelly (2009) furthers by saying, “rural places, now more than at any other point in history, are places of great loss—of people, natural resources, and, often, as a result, any vision of long-term viability” (p. 2).

Education in rural contexts needs to help students deal with these issues, and ideally present solutions and hope to students. Education must create the conditions for students to leave their home places, to travel intellectually and emotionally—within and across the borders of their own communities and elsewhere, and within themselves, in search of the forces that constitute them, socially, culturally, and emotionally (Kelly, 2009, p. 3).

Students from rural communities experience school differently than their urban counterparts. There are both advantages and disadvantages to living in rural communities. Socially, students in rural schools often have more personal interaction with their teachers, and are more apt to participate in community activities.

Rural schools tend to be smaller than urban schools. This carries a number of benefits for small rural schools: class sizes tend to be smaller; students enjoy more individual attention from their teachers; and teachers often know most, if

not all, of the students. There is also some evidence that small, rural schools can be more effective in helping their students learn better, behave better, and participate more in civic life. (Canadian Council on Learning, 2008, p. 15)

Despite the beneficial social interactions and relationships they may develop with their teachers, rural students consistently struggle academically. “Students from rural and remote communities do not, on average, perform as well as students living in urban communities” (Canadian Council on Learning, 2008, p. 9). Additionally, some trends seem to be exaggerated in rural students, specifically the gap between the sexes. “In most contexts—rural, urban or otherwise—girls generally outperform boys in literacy, but in rural contexts that gender gap is often greater than in urban contexts” (Canadian Council on Learning, 2008, p. 16). These issues are not limited to rural farm communities but extend to other population pockets such as Aboriginal communities.

In addition to facing barriers to education brought forth by their rural and isolated living situations, Aboriginal students face additional obstacles stemming from generations of trauma since European invaders arrived on the continent. Aboriginal children do not meet with the same level of academic success as their counterparts from other backgrounds. Only “forty-two per cent of Aboriginal children complete Grade 12 compared to 61 per cent in the broader population” (Alberta Teachers' Association, 2006, p. 46). The lack of academic success for Aboriginal students is a growing concern, as the number of students of Aboriginal heritage continues to increase.

The Aboriginal population is much younger than the non-Aboriginal population. In Ontario, the Aboriginal population (under age 25) makes up 46% of the total Aboriginal population. It is expected that this trend will continue, as the birth rate

among the Aboriginal population is approximately 1.5 times higher than the Canadian average. This will result in an increasing number of Aboriginal students moving through the school system. (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 34)

Partnerships between Aboriginal communities and government bodies help to improve the education system in Ontario for Aboriginal students, and it is likely that these changes will be beneficial for all students. It is important to note that the focus of this research project is not on Aboriginal students or their learning. Aboriginal students comprise a significant proportion of the student body at the school where I currently work, and so this background information is essential in providing context regarding the community.

### **Policy Development and Reform**

Gaskell and Levin (2010) discuss how changes at the macro level, along with economic, demographic, and cultural shifts in society “do not automatically convert into educational change; they matter hugely, but they work their way into schooling through the actions of those who make and implement educational policies” (p. 150). These changes to educational policies are a focus point as I read through and analyse transcripts from participant interviews. In recent years, there have been a multitude of policy documents issued that are designed to help teachers connect with students, and improve achievement rates (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005, 2010a, 2010b, 2011a).

Strategies to improve literacy rates have been implemented; however, it may be too soon to know whether or not they have been successful. The Ministry of Education continues to produce documents designed to assist teachers and educators with improving their professional practice, and thereby improving student achievement.

A recent focus of the Ministry of Education has been the inclusion and education of special needs students. In the elementary grades, there is a strong emphasis on accommodations and modifications for individual learners. This puts an enormous work load on teachers. As students transition to high school, the terminology of accommodation and modification gives way to differentiated instruction. Curriculum tells teachers what to teach, while differentiated instruction tells teachers how to teach it to a range of learners by employing a variety of teaching approaches (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2005). When differentiated instruction is not enough to help students succeed, alternative courses may be developed.

Special education classes, or in some cases locally developed courses, may be chosen. “Such courses may also be developed for students receiving special education programmes and services whose need for particular course content or for special preparation for further education or work cannot be met by a course based on provincial curriculum policy documents” (Ontario Ministry of Education and Training, 1999, p. 43). Much of the individualised attention students received in elementary school, through modification and accommodation, can be lost when students transition to high school. However, the implementation of different programs such as Student Success Teams (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2011b) and alternative learning programs (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010b) are designed to help students reach their academic goals at the secondary school level.

### **Narrative Inquiry**

Everyone has experiences from their days as a student. Some are positive, others are not. “From the beginning, narrative inquiry and person-centered, curriculum-related

studies have walked hand-in-hand, taking up a respected place in the teaching and teacher education literatures” (Craig, 2011, p. 20). Educators and people working in the education system have memories of school, first as a student and later as a professional. Narrative provides a method to draw out these stories of experience and learn from them.

Narrative can be defined as “a story or account of events, experiences, or the like, whether true or fictitious” (Narrative, n.d.). This definition has been further developed into a recognised qualitative method of research. For the purposes of this study, I refer to the definition of narrative inquiry described by Connelly and Clandinin (2006):

Arguments for the development and use of narrative inquiry come out of a view of human experience in which humans, individually and socially, lead storied lives. People shape their daily lives by stories of who they and others are and as they interpret their past in terms of these stories. Story, in the current idiom, is a portal through which a person enters the world and by which their experience of the world is interpreted and made personally meaningful. Viewed this way, narrative is the phenomenon studied in inquiry. Narrative inquiry, the study of experience as story, then, is first and foremost a way of thinking about experience. Narrative inquiry as a methodology entails a view of the phenomenon. To use narrative inquiry methodology is to adopt a particular narrative view of experience as phenomena under study. (p. 477)

There is a volume of Canadian-based research documenting the success of narrative inquiry on education and curriculum. In 1980, Clandinin and Connelly began a longitudinal study at Bay Street School—an urban school in downtown Toronto, working with individual teachers and students, while becoming part of the classroom community.

Clandinin and Connelly were aware of the perceptions of the school by the community.

They described their thoughts and concerns when beginning their project:

On one hand, Bay Street School's immediate history, the stories of Bay Street School, were much in our minds. We heard stories of it as a school with "racial problems," with "declining standards," a place to "send kids who were too troubled." We heard stories of the principal, new to the school, in which he was featured as innovative and community oriented. (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 67)

The research that began at Bay Street School evolved into the foundation of narrative inquiry as a methodology used by many researchers today. They explored individual stories, told and re-told stories of teachers, schools, and students. "To Connelly and Clandinin, teachers actively make curriculum alongside students, not merely implement curriculum as dictated by policy makers"(Craig, 2011, p. 21). For example, Stephanie was seen by her fellow teachers as messy, unorganised, and unprofessional until a new administrator was able to show Stephanie's colleagues that her style of teaching was working at Bay Street School (Clandinin & Connelly, 1996). The administrator pointed out how well Stephanie related to the community and to the students, and she began to be understood and admired by her colleagues. Clandinin and Connelly use stories of Bay Street School to understand teaching and educating, and the importance of using teachers' professional knowledge to improve education and curriculum. Clandinin and Connelly sought out the stories of schools as told by teachers, which was also the goal of this research project. Teachers' perceptions of their workplaces could be different from the perceptions of the people who make their homes in the community.



In her research, Pushor (2007) uses her own experiences as an educator and a parent to explore the importance of parental engagement in student and school success. She defines both parental involvement and parental engagement as factors that bring parents into schools.

For me, involvement describes those activities in which parents are invited to serve the school's agenda, to do the things educators deem important.

Engagement, differently describes activities which are mutually determined by educators and parents to be important for children and are lived out in a respectful and reciprocal relationship. (Pushor, 2007, p. 6)

Having experienced schools both as a parent and as an educator, Pushor has lived both sides of involvement and engagement. She uses narrative inquiry to explore her own stories, as well as stories from other parents and educators to improve parental engagement at schools and to change perceptions in the education system towards new ways of valuing parents and communities. Like Pushor, my parents have lived both sides of involvement and engagement at school—especially my mother. My mother's story is important in my research to bring depth and understanding of the community to my project.

Finding value and knowledge in experience is an age-old process. These stories, these narratives of experience, are personal—they reflect a person's life history—and social—they reflect the place and the contexts in which teachers live (Clandinin & Connelly, 1998). Informally, stories happen all around us all the time. We use them to share and relate with our friends, families and colleagues. We feel validated when we hear a story we can relate to, and we feel valued when someone relates to our story.

Narrative researchers seek ways of enriching and transforming experiences for themselves and others (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007). They take these experiences and stories and interpret them in ways that can be used to improve practice for others.

Telling or collecting stories is the beginning of the process of narrative inquiry, but it is through the multidimensional exploration of these stories that narrative knowledge emerges (Kitchen, 2009). In our day-to-day lives, telling and collecting stories is an informal process that contributes to our individual knowledge base and how we choose to lead our lives. Narrative inquiry takes much of the same process and builds on it, formalises and interprets the narrative knowledge (Kitchen, 2009) to inform a wider audience. This can be accomplished through a process of conversation from structured interviews to unstructured conversation and some form of systematic analysis (Hollingsworth & Dybodahl, 2007).

Narrative research is rewarding to the researcher who is seeking to make connections between individual stories, and to the research participants who are sharing their stories. Giving voice to participants and valuing their knowledge provides perspective to the audience and naturally leads to analysis and individual interpretation. Interweaving our accumulated knowledge with our personal stories in terms of who we are, were, and will be provides guidance for our personal and professional selves. As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) state,

As inquirers we meet ourselves in the past, present and the future. We tell remembered stories of ourselves from earlier times as well as more current stories. All of these stories offer possible plotlines for our future. (p. 60)

Connelly and Clandinin (2006) identify three commonplaces of narrative inquiry: temporality, sociality, and place. These commonplaces help narrative researchers to recognise the lens through which stories are viewed. *Temporality* refers to the passage of time, and the influence time has on story. As we tell or listen to stories, we are drawn into story by “looking not only at the event but to its past and to its future” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 50). Every person is an individual, and each individual views the world differently based on his or her past and current experiences. The social influences and experiences that have influenced the opinions and lens through which the individual views the world is the second commonplace, *sociality*. Finally, *place* refers to the physical location of the event or the series of places where the event or inquiry takes place. The commonplaces help us to recognise that stories are not told exactly as they happened, but as the participant remembers them and that these memories are influenced by previous and present experiences of the storyteller. “In addition to the constructed selves of narrator and audience, speakers invoke previous selves and relationships in the shared past” (Schely-Newman, 2009, p. 1).

### **Practising Teachers and the Use of Narrative Inquiry Methods**

As mentioned previously, Ciuffetelli Parker and Flessa (2011) describe collaboration and shared experiences amongst teachers as being important markers of success in schools affected by poverty. This type of sharing can occur only when teachers are able to hear each other’s stories and tell their own stories. Clandinin and Connelly (1996) use the metaphor of a professional knowledge landscape to describe the intricacies of relationships teachers experience each day between their personal lives and their profession. Clandinin and Connelly describe the place outside the classroom, as

being where knowledge is funnelled from. This is where new policy or instruction comes from. Inside the classroom is where “teachers are free to live stories of practice” (Clandinin & Connelly, 1996). This is where personal lives and knowledge from both teachers and students come into play. This is where the stories of school we remember are born. What teachers know depends on the school stories and stories of school that constitute their landscape. As this landscape shifts, what they know shifts as, indeed, do the values attached to that knowledge (Clandinin & Connelly, 1996). Professional knowledge landscape is understood as a landscape narratively constructed with historical, moral, emotional, and aesthetic dimensions (Clandinin, Huber, & Huber, 2006).

Narrative methods are powerful tools for educators. Writing about and sharing experiences with other teachers’ helps educators to construct knowledge together, and make sense of the theoretical aspects of their work, as well as the day-to-day chaos teachers regularly encounter. Clandinin, Downey, and Huber, (2009) describe how stories can help educators understand their professional community, and help them to stay on top of an ever-changing professional context.

Part of learning to compose stories to live by that are fluid is learning to think narratively about lives and about school contexts as knowledge landscapes. Part of sustaining teachers and ourselves as teacher educators is knowing how to navigate, to live on and in, shifting landscapes. (p. 146)

The influence writing and stories can have on teachers was explored by Ciuffetelli Parker (2010d) in a longitudinal study involving teacher candidates. Teacher candidates were asked to write to each other and discuss their newly founded professional lives, but soon their written conversations flowed and their personal practical knowledge became a

narrative unity describing their hopes, fears, and anxieties. The teacher candidates “became teachers through writing” (p. 1258). Ciuffetelli Parker describes one teacher candidate’s experiences,

Indeed, becoming a teacher through writing, for the participants in this study, was evidenced, as Cathy proclaims, not just as “another assignment” but as an opportunity for “unpacking our beliefs and biases, uncovering the hopes and fears.” Her wise words echoed throughout many of her peers’ own narratives as she acknowledged that “great personal discovery and knowledge are tied not only to our identities as teachers but to our role as humans.” (Ciuffetelli Parker, 2010d, p. 1258)

These teacher candidates were experiencing for the first time the struggles associated with teaching, and through writing were able to express their thoughts and feelings clearly and openly. Narrative is an important tool in unlocking the key to teacher development and understanding. “Literacy narratives are ... useful to the development of teacher knowledge, to reconcile the tensions between theory and practice, and to build authentic learning communities in our teacher education programs” (Ciuffetelli Parker, 2010d, p. 1258). During my study, I ask participants to write and reflect on experiences of either their childhood or community. This writing could help them to think more deeply about their experiences and help me to relate meaning to the stories they share.

When teachers share stories with their colleagues, the entire school community can change. Teachers’ stories, their personal practical knowledge, are the stories teachers live and tell of who they are and what they know (Clandinin et al., 2006). Understanding teaching requires paying attention to teachers both as individuals and as a group, listening

to their voices and the stories they tell about their work and their lives (Elbaz-Luwisch, 2007). Connelly and Clandinin (1985) described teachers' intuitive sense of knowing what to do in their teaching in order for students to learn. Narrative methods of knowing help teachers understand their personal practical knowledge (Kitchen, 2009). Often, teachers do not get the chance to share their knowledge with their colleagues. They do not recognise that their experiences can be of value to others in the field and that they are in fact experts in what they do. Teachers need opportunities to bring their intuitive knowledge to consciousness for critical evaluation (Yonemura, 1982). In her research, Yonemura brought several pairs of practicing teachers together once a week for 12 weeks to reflect on their teaching, and to have their teaching observed from time to time. These pairs helped the teachers validate their teaching practice, and increase their confidence as professionals.

Education can be studied by studying life or experiences of teachers and of their literacy teaching and learning (Ciuffetelli Parker, 2008). These stories of school and school stories influence teachers' professional practices both formally and informally. Stories of school are the stories given to schools, whereas school stories are those that educators within the school live and tell, and relive and retell (Craig, 2009). Every teacher has a unique story of school, both as a student and as a teacher. Researchers using a narrative inquiry methodology strive to find ways to incorporate themselves into the school story. Narrative inquirers cannot bracket themselves out of the inquiry but rather need to find ways to inquire into participants' experiences (Clandinin, 2006).

For the purposes of this study, narrative inquiry helped to unlock aspects of myself, both personally and professionally. I take my own personal, practical knowledge

(Connelly & Clandinin, 1988) and interweave it with the experiences of my participants.

Exploring my elementary education, and interacting with people who experienced these years with me provided insight into my development as a teacher, and could also provide insights into strategies for success in my own practice.

### **CHAPTER THREE: METHODS AND PROCEDURES**

This study used a narrative research design to explore stories of school and school stories (Clandinin, 2006). My goal as a qualitative researcher was to develop an understanding of my formative elementary education, and the challenges of the community where I grew up. The resulting stories were analysed for information to help improve my own professional practice, as well as other teachers working in similar situations.

#### **Participant Selection and Profile**

The participants consisted of one male (my father) and four females, including myself. Most participants were recruited via email. This email informed participants of the purpose of the project, and followed the format of the Letter of Invitation (see Appendix A) as cleared by the Brock University Research Ethics Board (REB# 09-274). Due to the intimate relationship with my parents, they were given a paper copy of the Letter of Invitation and asked to participate. All participants were told, both in the Letter of Invitation, and verbally that the success of this project would not depend on their participation, and therefore they were free to decline or withdraw at any time without any negative implications on the project. After receiving the letter of invitation, participants were asked to read and sign the Informed Consent Letter (see Appendix B).

I interviewed one of my most fondly remembered elementary teachers. Ms. Breanne was my Grade 8 teacher, and for years I had hoped she would be my teacher. I remember her as kind, caring, and thoughtful with the ability to make each child feel special. She shared her life with us by telling us about her children and her husband. In recent years, she has left the traditional classroom—first to develop a Supervised



Alternative Learning Program (SALEP) (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010b), and recently she began working as a Student Success teacher (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2011b). While she was my teacher, she was the bridge between the students and the everyday going-ons in the classroom and the community, including with parents. I hoped she would provide context regarding the Ontario education system, and the struggles of the particular school I attended as an elementary student.

Second, I interviewed a former classmate, Cassie, who attended school with me from Kindergarten through Grade 12. For many years we were inseparable, and in many ways she was my mirror image. A retrospective look into our collective narratives and shared experiences provided glimpses into each other's trials, tribulations, and triumphs (Ciuffetelli Parker & Cherubini, 2008). Although we joined different social circles in high school, we remain friends to this day, occasionally meeting for dinner. After completing our Ontario Academic Credit year, she moved to Toronto to attend college, while I moved to the Niagara area to attend university. Our goals were one in the same: to get out of that town, and to get jobs that would ensure we would not have to do the physical labour and hard work our parents endure as farmers.

I interviewed my parents in order to add a new dimension to critical incidents from my childhood. I wanted to know about their experiences dealing with my elementary school (e.g., parent council meetings, parent-teacher interviews) as well as overall dealing with the parent community. In a small town like ours, the parent community relates to each other on more than one level. They have children in the same classes, but additionally many of them attended school in the same class, in the same school, and in some cases with the same teachers. They also see each other at the local

store, in church, at the hockey arena, and at other social events. I wanted to explore how their interwoven lives affected their view of school. I realised that by inviting my parents to participate in the study they may have felt obligated to participate due to our close relationship. It was explained in detail that the project was able to proceed without their contributions, and the study would not suffer any negative consequences based on their decision whether or not to participate. Although my father consented to participate in the study, shortly into the interview process, my uncle arrived and required his assistance in a farming matter. Unfortunately, my father did not return in time to contribute to the conversation. He did not bring any written stories to the interview, but agreed with what my mother was saying, and trusted her to represent both their sentiments and interests in this study.

The first person I interviewed was Ms. Breanne, my seventh grade teacher. I thought she was fantastic in everything she did. As an elementary teacher, she taught in all divisions. Later, she began working as a Special Needs teacher, travelling to five schools each week. Ms. Breanne developed and worked at a SALEP centre for seven years, working with high-risk, high-need students. Recently, she has begun working in a high school as a Student Success teacher.

Cassie and I have been friends since elementary school. Her parents, like mine are farmers. Her brother was in my sister's class in elementary school. She has worked as a Property Assessor in York Region for approximately 10 years.

Additionally, I interviewed my parents, Nina and Grant. Both of my parents were born in 1957, and have worked as farmers for their entire married life (since 1979). Although my father was also born and raised on a dairy farm, my mother was not. She

moved around as a child, as her father's job status was not always secured. My mother completed Grade 12, and married at age 22. My father completed Grade 13, and was an Ontario scholar. Although he enrolled in university, he dropped out after a few weeks and returned home to become a farmer. My parents have three daughters and two sons. My sister and I have completed university degrees; my brother has completed college, and is currently completing his apprenticeship training. My youngest sister entered college in September 2010, and my youngest brother began university in October 2011.

Finally, I also take the role of participant in this project. I completed my teacher training in Australia in 2006, and worked there for 6 months before returning to Ontario. I have been teaching (both supply and contract) in Ontario since 2007. I am currently employed as a secondary school teacher in southern Ontario, where I teach science.

### **Data Collection**

Prior to meeting with participants, I shared my own stories of education (Appendix C) with participants. Participants were asked to write down three stories that they felt were pivotal in describing their experiences with the education system in their community, and bring them to our meeting. They were asked to share stories that defined their role, either as a teacher, student, or parent. These stories, along with my own, formed the basis of conversation for our meetings. Throughout our discussions, I asked participants various open-ended questions (Appendix D), so that the participants could "best voice their experiences unconstrained by any perspectives of the researcher" (Creswell, 2008, p. 225). At the conclusion of each discussion, I composed field notes describing my thoughts and feelings about the discussion. This process helped me to

later portray the *relational circumstances* of the situation in the field text (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 95).

We met in private places, as chosen by each participant. The meetings were digitally (audio) recorded. I transcribed the recordings immediately. The transcripts, the secondary participants' stories, and my own field notes were used in the data analysis process. After analysis, participants were given the chance to complete a member-check process to increase the trustworthiness of the data.

### **Writing as Field Text**

Participants were asked to write stories, and bring them to our meeting. Writing stories of one's own experiences is one way of putting oneself "in the midst" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 100). By bringing these stories with them to our meeting, participants had already spent time reflecting on their experiences with the education system, specifically their educational experiences in our community. "Thought and understanding can grow and clarify through the process of writing" (Bazerman et al., 2005, p. 57). The stories the participants brought with them led to additional stories they shared during the conversation that helped to lead and give depth to the discussion. After our conversations, I reflected on the stories shared by the secondary participants. The stories they shared helped me to write my own stories, both as field text and later as the stories I used in the analysis process.

### **Conversations as Field Text**

Participants were asked to meet with me individually, or as a couple – in the case of my parents. I asked questions of the participants, with a particular emphasis on collecting stories from them. The nature of conversation invites "equity among

participants and flexibility to allow participants to establish forms and topics appropriate to their group inquiry” (Clandinin et al., 2006, p. 32). Before our meeting, I asked participants to think of three “stories of school” (Clandinin, 2006) from their own experiences that highlight their experiences, either as a student, as parents interacting with the school, or as a professional in the education system. These stories were the starting points for our conversations. Prior to our meeting, I shared stories of my own in writing in order to open the door to conversation. There is probing in conversation, in-depth probing, but it is done in a situation of mutual trust, listening and caring for the experiences described by the other (Clandinin, 2006). During our meeting, I probed the stories told by participants for underlying issues, such as how the challenges of poverty have influenced their educational experience, available supports for students (e.g., local or Ministry mandated), as well as community interactions and programmes.

### **Field Notes as Field Text**

During (if possible) and after each conversation with participants I composed field notes detailing our meeting. “Field notes are the text out of which we can tell stories of our story of experience” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 104). These field notes were used to record my thoughts and feelings about the experience as well as details an audio recording may miss. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) explain that “field texts slide back and forth between records of the experience under study and records of oneself as researcher experiencing the experience” (p. 87). This type of writing helped me to reflect on the larger ideas learned from the experience and note how others responded as well (Creswell, 2008, p. 224). At the conclusion of the discussions, these field notes were analysed along with the other transcripts.

### Analysis

After I met with each participant individually, I transcribed the recordings of our meeting. Once the recordings were transcribed, I coded the data. The coding was done by organising and managing the most meaningful bits of data by assigning tags or labels to the data (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). I analysed the transcripts, my own field notes and stories, as well as the stories the participants chose to share with me using this method. After the coding process was complete, I looked for patterns and themes that emerged. “The identification of themes provides the complexity of a story and adds depth to the insight about understanding individual experiences” (Creswell, 2008, p. 521). These patterns were further subdivided and categorised through the identification of repeating patterns, stories and words. From these patterns I tried to interpret a larger meaning about the phenomenon of the study, which is presented as findings.

The findings presented in this project in Chapters Four and Five are not a complete list of all the themes that emerged during the analysis process. Additional themes were identified; however, for the purposes of this study, three main themes were chosen to be the focus of the project. There was not any overlap in the identified themes between participants; however, similar themes continued to present themselves in the stories from the same participant. The highlighted themes of *student authorship*, *teaching practice* and *community involvement* and corresponding stories were chosen because of their relevance to my own teaching practice of school stories and stories of school. Based on these themes, I have shared my own stories with the intention of juxtaposing them with the participants’ stories, and in order to offer perspective and deeper understanding of the lived experiences of all participants. By making meaning out

of the storied lives of teachers and former students in this study, relational knowing (Hollingsworth et al., 1993) is illustrated and used as a guiding term to understand further the importance of relationship between and amongst teachers and students.

### **Trustworthiness of Data**

“In narrative inquiry, field texts are always interpretive, always composed by an individual at a certain moment in time” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 84). To ensure my interpretation of events is accurate and fair, participants were asked to member check the data. During this process, participants were asked to check the accuracy of their accounts, specifically whether descriptions were complete and realistic, and if interpretations were fair and representative (Creswell, 2008). This process occurred before the information was used in any final publications, including this thesis project. This process strengthened the validity of the data, and ensures the information collected is a true representation of their experiences.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Permission to conduct this study was obtained from the Brock University Research Ethics Board (see Appendix E). During the course of the research, personal identifiers such as names, places, and locations were collected; however, pseudonyms are used in the final research document. It is possible that people, as well as the community at the focus of the research are identifiable to others known to me. Every effort has been taken to avoid the use of specific names, locations, and events.

Participant anonymity is not possible for all participants in this research project. My parents have been informed that they may be identifiable based on their relationship with me. They have been advised that the data collected from them is not anonymous,

and their identities cannot be fully confidential and to not disclose any information they do not want published in the final thesis document or any other publications.

Additionally, no participant has been identified by name in discussion pertaining to the study. Pseudonyms have been assigned to each participant, including my parents.

Personal identifiers have been retained in the form of a master list linking pseudonyms and actual names of participants. This list, as well as all written records and audio recordings are secured at my home in a locked filing cabinet. Electronic data has been password protected. The data will be kept for a period of five years, and then destroyed.

### **Challenges in Data Collection and Analysis**

During the data collection and analysis process, there were challenges to my position as both researcher and participant. At times these roles overlapped, and it was important for me to play both roles honestly. Additionally, interviewing people I have known since childhood presented challenges in establishing my role as a researcher. I wondered whether they would see me in my professional role, or as someone they have known for a very long time. Our prior relationship could have strengthened the interview process, as a certain level of trust had already been established. Finally, in interviewing my parents, and in knowing them as deeply as I do—it could have been difficult to hear or for them to reveal some of the difficulties they have dealt with, which as their child they kept from me.



## **CHAPTER FOUR: USING STORY TO UNLOCK THE MYSTERY OF MYSELF AS A TEACHER**

This study used stories to explore my formative elementary education, growing up in a community that was experiencing poverty. I studied the impact and implications of these experiences for me as a teacher and researcher as they relate to my present day personal and professional knowledge of education. My own experiences and reflections form the basis of the study, but I used the contributions of secondary participants to validate or offer alternative perspectives on my interpretation of events. Specifically, my research question was “What stories emerge from my childhood and from other participants that inform my own teaching, specifically related to my current teaching position? How do these stories inform my own “stories of school and school stories” (Clandinin & Connelly, 1996, 2000; Connelly & Clandinin, 2006)”?

The themes that emerged from this study were student authorship, good teaching practice, and community involvement. The themes are discussed using the three commonplaces of narrative inquiry, identified by Connelly and Clandinin (2006) as temporality, sociality, and place. Temporality refers to the passage of time, and the influence time has on story. In this study, the stories used come from the past. Some stories come from the recent past, as in the narratives of my teaching experiences. In stories, the past is more distant as the participants remember a time when they participated in the day-to-day activities of elementary school more than two decades ago. The social impact and experiences that have influenced the opinions and lens through which the individual views the world is the second commonplace, sociality. Finally, place refers to the physical location of the event or the series of places where the event or

inquiry takes place. In this study, the rural location of my elementary school and the surrounding community guide the discussion of this commonplace. The themes presented in this chapter are student authorship, good teaching practice, and community involvement.

I began this chapter by first introducing the participants of the study, who shared stories of their experiences working, and living in the community where I grew up. As a participant in this study, I included a description of myself, based on my professional role as a secondary teacher. After the participant introductions, I share a story from each participant that was shared with me as an important school story (Clandinin & Connelly, 1996) from their past. Inspired by their school story, I echo each of their stories with one of my own. The stories provide a method by which to apply my current experiences with those that shaped my beginnings. By listening to the stories shared with me, using both conversation and writing as field text, I position myself in the midst and use writing about my own experiences as a way to further this experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). From the transcripts of the conversations I had with the participants, I looked for patterns and themes that emerged. The identification of themes provides the complexity of a story and adds depth to the insight about understanding individual experiences (Creswell, 2008, p. 521). These patterns were further subdivided and categorised through the identification of repeating patterns, stories, and words. Following are storied introductions of the participants in this study: Heather, Ms. Breanne, Cassie, and Nina.

### **Heather: Me, Myself, and I**

I choose to start with myself because this project begins, influences, and ends with my own story. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) suggest “one of the starting points

for narrative inquiry is the researchers own narrative of experience” (p. 70). My story is also embedded in the stories of my participants and my relationships with them. These relationships, as well as so many more, have formed my personality, my personal beliefs, and my professional practice.

After completing my teaching degree in Australia, my first teaching position was in a mid-sized, urban school in Darwin, Australia. Darwin is the capital city of the Northern Territory, and the largest city around for thousands of kilometres, and yet it is a very laid-back, casual place. Teaching at this school greatly influenced my personal teaching philosophy, and is the guiding force behind me as a teacher—even today, almost five years later. My colleagues at this school were extremely professional, and experts in their teaching area. They went out of their way to meet each student’s need, whether it meant coming in early, staying late or working through lunch. My colleagues’ internal drive and commitment to students was not something that could be taught in a teacher education program, but only experienced. It made me want to be the best teacher I could be.

Darwin is considered quite remote by the rest of Australia’s standards. Other metropolitan areas must be reached by plane. Driving 30 minutes outside the city limits will bring you to the Outback. Because of Darwin’s remoteness, many of the Aboriginal people who live in the area have maintained traditions and traditional ways of life that have been lost elsewhere. Working and living in Darwin was truly my first exposure to the pride and knowledge held by aboriginal peoples. I carry in my heart, awe and respect for Aboriginal culture. I think this respect comes from a sense of envy I have of knowing one’s cultural languages and traditions. Although my grandfather did not speak English

when he started school, he was taught that English was the proper language to use—and all of our German family traditions were lost with him. I am envious of people who know their familial traditions, languages, and culture. Aboriginal people have a very old culture, and the respect they show for their ancestors and traditions is wonderful and amazing to me.

In my current teaching practice, I embrace inclusivity and encourage diversity in my classroom. While planning my lessons each day, I try to use differentiated instruction methods to engage my students, and offer them choice in their assessments and evaluations. It is common for culminating tasks in my classes to allow students to use their strengths to demonstrate their learning, usually through the multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1983). I try to encourage students to make decisions for themselves, and find this approach encourages them and gives them confidence in their abilities. I work to improve myself, encourage the students, and work with like-minded colleagues to make the school an inviting, challenging, and safe place for the students.

I consider myself an optimist, but recognise there are over-reaching challenges that affect much of the student body. I work in a rural school, in south-western Ontario. The school where I teach has approximately 600 students; 40% of the students in the school self-identify as part of a First Nations group. Sometimes, it is challenging to engage the students and to help them see the benefit of obtaining a secondary school diploma. I feel fortunate to be at a school with a supportive administrative team, and to have a team of school counsellors who know most students individually, as well as their families. They are eager to suggest ways to connect with the students, and help them be successful. I often go to them for advice, and yet many of my colleagues seem not to use

these services. I often wonder why other teachers do not seek advice from these individuals as often as I do. Could it be the pressure from administration to improve our testing results? Could it be the time burden of extracurricular activities? With a heavy heart, I wonder if it is the lack or loss of passion for their job. There is evidence to suggest that school success has at its foundation in teaching excellence, high quality collaboration and effective leadership (Ciuffetelli Parker, Becker, & Flessa, 2011; Flessa, Gallagher-Mackay, & Ciuffetelli Parker, 2010; Levin, 2006). Regrettably, standardised tests do not have the ability to measure these types of successes, and it is unfortunate that the school I work in consistently tests below the school board and provincial averages for the Grade 9 math assessments as well as the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (Education Quality and Accountability Office, 2011).

I also wonder whether racism may also be a factor of conflict and challenge where I teach. The majority of teachers at the school are White, and 40% of the student population is Aboriginal, self-identified as members of mainly the Six Nations and New Credit bands. There are underlying currents of mistrust, radiating from a local native land dispute in the larger community that has escalated to violence in recent years. The challenges with which I see many students struggle echo the difficulties of my own school mates long ago: poverty, exclusion from resources found in more urban centres, and uncertain futures. I hope to use the stories garnered from this study to reconcile my own inner turmoil of teaching with strategies I can use to improve my professional practice, in turn helping the students I teach meet with a higher level of success—whether it be social, academic, personal, or professional. It is not easy for me to dig deep into my inner thoughts and feelings, but this study is important to me because it obligates me to

consider the ways past experiences have moulded who I am as a teacher today and how I can be the best teacher I can be in order to have my students succeed.

### **Ms. Breanne**

Ms. Breanne is the first participant in this study, besides myself. She was my Grade 7 teacher. I looked forward to her being my teacher, because I saw her as being kind, dynamic, and caring. I knew I would love being in her class. Ms. Breanne taught at the elementary school I attended for 12 years, leaving to pursue a position working with special needs children. After two years at that program, she moved to the secondary level and for several years, Ms. Breanne developed and ran a SALEP.

Supervised Alternative Learning may be used for students who are not otherwise excused under section 21 of the Education Act. It is intended to be used for a very small segment of the student population, and only when other measures to help a young person remain in school are not effective. A period of time away from regular school attendance can help a young person resolve an issue so that he or she can return to school later. (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010b, p. 6)

Understanding, experience, and compassion led Ms. Breanne to this position, working with students on the fringes of the education system. These students have not succeeded in a regular school environment, and so come to the SALEP centre for a more personalised, individualised classroom setting.

Perhaps unbeknownst to her, Ms. Breanne had been trained in deficit theory, the idea that oppressed people are responsible for their relative lots in life due to their individual and collective deficiencies (Collins, 1988). In my role as a research assistant (Ciuffetelli Parker, 2010a; Ciuffetelli Parker & Flessa, 2011), I witnessed many of the

stereotypes teachers brought with them regarding families living in poverty. During a session where the teachers were asked to describe signs that students lived in poverty, teachers discussed children smelling of cat urine or cigarette smoke, or bringing Kraft Lunchables® to eat for lunch (field notes, February 2, 2009). It was at these sessions where I began to recognise the stereotypes I brought with me to the classroom, my own deficit model thinking, and I identified why I needed to change my personal philosophy and understanding of my teaching practice.

During our conversation, Ms. Breanne shared that she attended a week-long training session led by Ruby Payne, focusing on her controversial book *Bridges out of Poverty* (Payne et al., 2001). In this book, Payne and her colleagues describe what people living in poverty are missing, and how people from the middle-class can help them overcome these deficits. For example, Payne they describe how important role models are to success: “All individuals have roles models. The question is the extent to which the role model is nurturing or appropriate. Can the role model parent? Work successfully?” (p. 19). The implication is that people in poverty cannot be, nor have they had good role models. The book includes sweeping generalisations regarding people living in poverty. For example, regarding what they label the hidden rules of poverty, they write

Three of the hidden rules in poverty are the following: The noise level is high (the TV is always on, and everyone may talk at once), the most important information is non-verbal, and one of the main values of an individual to the group is an ability to entertain. (Payne et al., 2001, p. 19)

To many teachers being professionally developed by Payne, they may not realise that her rules are stereotypical generalisations that need further consideration by practising teachers working in marginalised communities. Payne's work needs caution in this regard.

Ms. Breanne's training with *Bridges out of Poverty* (Payne et al., 2001) has taught her to seek out, identify, and label these perceived deficiencies in her students. Ms. Breanne takes on the image of hero and helps her students overcome these deficiencies and by doing so works to change her students' future. Ms. Breanne labours tirelessly to help the disadvantaged students in her classroom achieve success. She schedules and drives students to doctors' appointments. She teaches table manners and etiquette expected at middle-class social events. Ms. Breanne sees her role as saving students from their poverty, from their families, and from the unfortunate situations they find themselves in. Her training on Payne's theories (Payne, 1996; Payne et al., 2001) have taught Ms. Breanne to see herself as her students rescuer. "Payne offers educators the role of savior" (Sato & Lensmire, 2009, p. 368). Ms. Breanne sees herself as an advocate for students and a keystone in the path to success for those students attending SALEP, who are unable to handle the structure of a regular classroom. Several times during our conversation, Ms. Breanne used Payne's (1996) deficit terminology, such as "generational poverty", "situational poverty", and "culture of poverty".

Although these are worthy and heroic efforts on her part, several of the stories shared by Ms. Breanne show a hidden pattern of students advocating for themselves, which in fact debunk the deficit model of thinking espoused in Ruby Payne's workshops. Ms. Breanne's story is important to this study because she brings to the forefront deficit



models of practice that are present in rural teaching communities. She is a very hard working teacher that I can relate to both as her former student, and now as a colleague. The stories she shared have me to work through my tensions with the past and present of the community where I grew up. There is no one quick fix to students and families living in poverty and I have come to realise that story is one way to understand further the complexities of my teaching profession.

### **Cassie**

Cassie is the second participant in this study. Cassie and I grew up in the same community, where long ago, our fathers attended elementary and secondary school together. Both of our fathers chose to follow the career choices of their own fathers, and became dairy farmers. Cassie and I are both the oldest children in our families. In many ways, Cassie was my mirror image (Ciuffetelli Parker & Cherubini, 2008) growing up. We shared similar experiences, and we both knew from an early age that we would leave the farm and pursue professional occupations in more urban centres. As children, Cassie and I were not exposed to urban life, but were often expected to help with chores on the farm. We hated it. We would often talk about what we would do after we finished high school, and moved to the city. As high school drew to a close, the anticipation of escaping the rural life grew. We found it difficult to relate to others in our community; even some of our closest friends did not feel the same pull as we did. We wanted more, but at the same time less. That is, we wanted more choice, more freedom, and more opportunities; we wanted less physically demanding lives, less weather-dependent jobs, and less restriction. We did not want to have to be home by 7:00 p.m. every single day of the year in order to milk the cows. We did not want our income to be based on the

proportion of sunny days to rain. Our plans came to fruition and, after high school; we both attended post-secondary school and moved away from the community where we were raised. Our chosen career paths made it difficult to return to the community. For me, it was a lack of opportunities in my home town, and for Cassie her training was urban-regional specific. We enjoy urban life, where all our needs are met, easily, often within walking distance. This was all very new to us. On the farm, travelling to get groceries or any other simple needs was often seen as a hassle, and time was valuable—so much so that each trip to town needed to be purposeful, and ideally multitasked.

However, not everything in our upbringing was similar. Although we attended the same church, religion had much more influence on Cassie's family life than mine. Her parents sheltered her from the world more than mine did, and instilled a level of fear of the unknown. Whether it be unknown foods, experiences, or people as strangers—her parents sheltered Cassie from the unknown world. She did not watch much television, and her internet use was very restricted. She was taught that life outside the community was dangerous, and she needed to be wary of everyone and everything different—as they were likely up to no good, or they would try to cheat you. Cassie shared with me that her parents often idolised the lifestyle of the Mennonite communities in our area, especially the aspect of their closed society. Her parents wanted to shelter Cassie and her siblings from all the evil in the world. When Cassie was in Grade 3, her parents considered transferring her and her younger brother to a private school where “traditional” values were taught. The boys and girls were separated. During their visit, the girls were knitting, and the boys were chopping wood. The final deciding factor, which kept Cassie in public school, was that her parents would have had to drive the children to school each

day, about 20 minutes. They were unable to make that commitment, and so Cassie and her siblings remained in our town's community school.

As a young girl, Cassie recognised inconsistencies between what she was taught and what she perceived. She began to question the truths of her experience. Looking back on her childhood, Cassie identified several deficiencies—especially in the education system that she feels existed because of limited resources, resulting in a generally uneducated population and isolation in the community.

### **Nina**

Nina, my mother, is the third participant in this study. Although my father was present, and participated to an extent in the discussion process, he did not bring any stories to share and left the conversation early to deal with another matter. As such, he is not quoted in the study, as essential findings did not come from his limited participation. He plays a critical role in my life and that of my mothers, and should be considered a participant-observer for the sake of the study.

My parents, Nina and Grant, were married in 1979. They have five children, ranging in age from 18 to 30. They are happily married, and planning their retirement. My father and his father before him were born and raised in the community where they still live. As children, we were raised to appreciate what we had, be kind to others, and work hard—physically and academically. We were expected to help with chores on the farm, and given responsibilities from a very young age. I have always regarded my parents with a lot of respect, and as I have gotten older the level of respect I have for them has grown. I have come to understand the wisdom they've accumulated in their lifetimes, and enjoy learning from them. As an adult, I enjoy spending time with my

parents, and sharing our common interests. Our relationship is strong, and continues to grow and change as we move forward into new chapters in our lives.

Nina and Grant are active members of their community. They regularly participate in a variety of community events and clubs, and feel privileged to contribute back to the community that has given them so much. They have experienced several hardships over the course of their marriage, including three devastating fires. After the fires, the community rallied around my parents, and helped them recover their losses. These were very difficult times for our family, emotionally, physically and financially. The support of friends and family were vital in the recovery process, and I doubt we could have come back from these tragedies without their support.

When my siblings and I were children, both of my parents were involved in our education. They helped us if we had problems with our homework, advised us through projects—but most importantly, they were always inquiring about what we were doing at school. These daily inquiries let me know that I was not alone, and that my parents truly cared about my education. I believe this is why I value formal education so highly. Additionally, both of my parents went on school trips as parent volunteers, and my mother especially was active in the school. She was part of the parent council, advocated to her women’s group to make donations to the school, and volunteered her time on a regular basis at the school.

### **Sharing Our Stories**

Following, I present six stories, one from each of the participants in the study and three from my own experiences. From the stories gathered, three themes have been considered to inform my own “stories of school and school stories” (Clandinin &

Connelly, 2000; Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). In Ms. Breanne's story, the theme of student advocacy and authorship is presented. Ms. Breanne authors her own story in such a manner that allows her to present herself as an advocate for students. Though she may be unaware, there is a subtle existence of a deficit theory model in her practices—practices she was trained in which is discussed further in Chapter Five. Cassie shares a story from elementary school where a teacher does not uphold the ethical standards of practice (Ontario College of Teachers, 2006). Finally, my mother Nina shares experiences that demonstrate the importance community support has on a school. I echo each participant's story with one from my own experience. I use the stories to make sense of my own experiences, and to explore in depth the themes presented.

### **Recognising the Silent Voice**

Ms. Breanne teaches students who struggle in a traditional school setting, and who need a fresh approach to learning. In the SALEP setting, Ms. Breanne has been successful in helping students earn high school credits, and either returns to a regular classroom or graduate. Ms. Breanne relies on the training she has received, funded by her school board and based on the work of Ruby Payne (Payne, 1996; Payne et al., 2001). Ms. Breanne authors her own story, as that of an advocate for her students who do not have the ability to advocate for themselves. This story is about a student, Amy, who attended Ms. Breanne's SALEP class, but was struggling and was asked to leave the program. A few weeks later, Amy called Ms. Breanne asking for help enrolling at another school.

Amy was attending SALEP, and things were going fine but she needed a lot—you needed to advocate a lot for her. She didn't have the skills to advocate for herself.

She was going to be going to SH [a local high school]. The reason she was going to SH, was she had too many strikes against her at SALEP. If they have too many strikes against them, they get demitted.

If they don't attend more than 85% of the time [they get demitted], but most of them do and hers wasn't attendance. She loved coming to school because she was in the middle of nowhere. I think she got caught smoking up a couple times, but that wasn't what got her demitted. She would go at lunch, twice we caught her—and she would steal. Now, the last time she stole something she stole a pregnancy test. Which almost makes your heart ache—if she had come to me I would have paid for it in a minute. I take them to their doctor's appointments and all that. What she did was stole it, used it in the washroom of the store, and threw the container in the garbage in the store and got caught. That wasn't the only thing. She had stolen some shirts the year before. She had to be demitted.

I was worried about her, because I knew she didn't have anyone to advocate for her. She was going to be going to SH and she had to go on her own and register for that. Normally if they were part of SALEP I would transition them and help them, but she had to go on her own. She had it set up that sometime over the exam period her mom was going to take her in. Dad works in Toronto, one vehicle—he was going to get a ride. In order for him to get down there, it was a big deal. He made arrangements. Mom brought the toddler and her into the school, and when they got there the school said, “Do you have an appointment?” Mom said “No, I didn't even know if I could get here”. They said “Our time's valuable, and the principal can't see you today”. The mom, instead

of flying off and losing her temper like I know she could, said “Ok, can I make an appointment for next week then?”

So the next week they had to try to get a ride for the dad again, and he couldn’t get a ride so they set it up with their uncle. He was going to come all the way over, pick her up and take her into register. The uncle got into a fight with the aunt the night before and that was the mom’s sister. So, to teach the aunt a lesson he said he’s wasn’t taking her into her appointment in the morning.

She called me at the centre and I picked up the phone and all I hear is “uhh uhh”. She is sobbing. My heart starts racing and I’m thinking it’s my own kids, and what’s wrong? What’s wrong? She said “I have no future. I have no life. What am I going to do? This is the end of all my dreams.”

I said “Slow down, what’s going on?” She said she couldn’t get a ride in. I said, ok–this is what you need to do. You need to hang up with me, I calmed her down–you need to call in, you need to explain it, you need to set up another appointment and I’ll help you find transportation. I want you to do that when you’ve calmed down, then I want you to call me back and tell me how it goes. She hangs up and I quick call the school. I tell the school. This is what’s happened. I’m advocating for her. You need to help her. This girl has no resources, she has no transportation, she has no support–she’s already been turned away once. They said ok–thanks for calling. As a result, she gets registered and gets set up for school. However, I don’t think that would have happened without someone advocating for her. I just don’t think she would have gone back to school. She’s over 16; she just would have been a drop-out. Living in a rural

area with absolutely no money and no resources and no transportation. They have no way of getting themselves around to help themselves. (Story Retold by Ms. Breanne, March 16<sup>th</sup> 2011)

Guided by the philosophies in *Bridges out of Poverty* (Payne et al., 2001), Ms. Breanne authors this story from a place where she is advocating for a student with no skills to do so on her own. Payne et al. (2001) state, “We can neither excuse persons from poverty nor scold them for not knowing; as professionals we must teach them and provide support, insistence, and expectations” (p. 7). Although it is true that teachers should strive to help all students, Payne et al. (2001) implies that students and families living in poverty will never be able to help themselves. She stereotypes people living in poverty as a type of culture. She advises educators that “many of the attitudes that students and parents bring with them are an integral part of their culture and belief systems” (Payne, 1996, p. 45). However, “culture is not static and individual responses to their environment cannot be easily predicted” (Noguera, 2003, p. 440). In contrast to Payne’s theory, poverty is not destiny; students can do better for themselves and break out of the cycle of poverty. Children from poverty can achieve at high levels when teachers respond to their needs and create conditions that are conducive to learning (Williams & Noguera, 2010). Thus, there appears to be a perspective of her story that Ms. Breanne may not have considered, based on her own workshop training.

Amy needed help and knew Ms. Breanne could and would help her. Amy knew Ms. Breanne understood how the education system works, and asked for advice and assistance in navigating it. Ms. Breanne outlined the steps Amy needed to be successful, specifying “you need to call in, you need to explain it, you need to set up another



appointment and I'll help you find transportation." What is less obvious, however, is that perhaps Amy advocated for herself, by contacting Ms. Breanne and asking for guidance and assistance. Amy was not deficient in any capacity. She made an appropriate contact, asked for assistance, and followed through on Ms. Breanne's advice in order to reach her goal of being registered at the new high school. Ms. Breanne represents many teachers who see themselves as the pivot point between success and failure for their students, especially those at high risk. It is important for educators to realise when a student is advocating for themselves, rather than make the assumption that the student is helpless. Ms. Breanne recalled the story of Amy, and reflected that if it were not for her actions, this child would be lost. At further glance, Amy should be recognised and acknowledged for arranging transportation, and bringing her mother to the school for registration. When her initial attempt was unsuccessful, Amy contacted someone she knew could help her.

After hearing the story of Amy and Ms. Breanne, I was able to recall a similar experience from my own career. Shane is a Grade 9 boy, who did not obtain any credits during the first semester of school. During the second semester, I became increasingly frustrated by the effort I devoted to Shane, yet perceived very little in return. The following story details the array of emotions I experienced with Shane, including frustration, empathy, and finally recognition of how he was advocating for himself.

Shane is in my Grade 9 class. It is a locally developed course, where I teach both math and science and have the students from September until June, unlike the majority of the classes at our school, which are semestered. From the very beginning, Shane was uncooperative. He would not write anything down, or even copy work off the board. He would wear his headphones and play on his cell

phone during class—neither of which were not allowed—and this often resulted in him being sent to the office. However, Shane was in class everyday. I have called home on several occasions, but have either not reached anyone or been told there was nothing they could do at home to help me. I have spoken to the guidance counsellor, and asked for help—with little success.

And yet, I think Shane enjoys my class. Although he does not complete anything, he comes almost every day. Shortly after Christmas, he confided in me that he was held back early in elementary school, but pushed from Grade 7 into Grade 9. He felt he was not ready for high school, and told his elementary school he did not want to come. Shane does not believe he can complete high school work. His coping strategy is to do nothing, so afterwards he can tell himself he didn't try. He is terrified that if he tries something, he will fail—and he cannot bear this sense of failure again.

Shane did not successfully complete any courses during first semester. In mid-April, with two months left of the school year, the principal asked me if he was going to get either his math or science credit. Although his math mark was around 30%, his science mark was a 51% at mid-term time. I was told that it was likely that science would be the only credit he would achieve this year, and the principal asked if I could work with Shane to help him get the credit.

The next day, I made a deal with Shane. If he came to period 2—his math and science class, he did not have to go to his scheduled period three class. Instead, he could come to my office during my prep period, and work on overdue math and science work to improve his mark. Shane agreed, as he didn't like his

period 3 course, and I knew he currently had 7% in the course and it would be very difficult for him to obtain the credit.

Shane's attendance has drastically decreased. Although he initially came to see me during period 3, he stopped after a week. I feel helpless. I don't know what else I can do. (Personal Reflection, May 1<sup>st</sup>, 2011)

In this story of school (Clandinin & Connelly, 1996) I find myself advocating and accommodating for Shane in many different ways. I feel I am doing everything in my power to help him—making deals with him, calling home, talking to guidance counsellors and discussing him with the administration. I have brought him to the attention of the Student Success Team, a dedicated team of a principal, teachers, and a guidance counsellor who provide extra attention and support for individual students (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2011b). Several of Shane's other teachers told me I needed to give up on him, and let him deal with the consequences of his actions. I became frustrated because I was putting a lot of time and effort into helping Shane succeed, with very little being reciprocated. It took me a while to realise how he had manipulated situations so he could rationalise his failure as not his own fault, by breaking school rules so he would be kicked out of class, by not attending, and by not participating. Perhaps I missed the subtle ways he was in fact advocating for himself—sharing that he had been pushed into high school against his wishes, and agreeing to meet with me during period three—was this a call for help? Did I miss something?

Olson and Craig (2001) would describe Shane and Amy's actions as a demonstration of their narrative authority (p. 669). They explain further that we learn to construct and reconstruct knowledge, through our experiences. These are experiences and

the stories we construct (or author) about the meaning of these experiences are narrative in form (Olson & Craig, 2001, p. 670). As a teacher, I believe it is important to let students to express themselves, and share their experiences with others. However, as the teacher, I may not use forethought in my actions. I resonated with Cutri's words (2011) when she says "It is true that although I want my students to achieve narrative authority in my class, there are times when I disagree with what they say and, intentionally or not, shut down their narrative authority by asserting my own" (p. 210). Working with Shane, and other students like him, has taught me that I need to be more deliberate in my actions, and pay attention to the subtleties that are happening around me. Students may be trying to tell me something that is important for me to hear.

### **Recognising place, time and sociality in student voice**

The theme I identify from the stories of Amy and Shane is student authorship. Cutri (2011) describes narrative authority as a way to express and enact personal practical knowledge and explore the meaning of this knowledge through sharing stories. As teachers and students listen and work through the shared stories, their narrative authority comes through more clearly. Keyes (2011) describes how narrative authority can authorise meaning for teachers as they share stories of teaching. The same can be said for students who find they are trying to share stories of their struggles. Thus, Amy and Shane share their stories and, by doing so, share meaning for their teachers as they share stories of their lives. Looking at the stories of Amy and Shane, using the three commonplaces of narrative inquiry (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006) helps narrative researchers, such as myself, to recognise the lens through which stories are viewed. In many ways, the places where both Ms. Breanne and I teach are very similar-small, rural

high schools that bus their students in from large geographic areas. The majority of students are bussed in, with many bus rides over an hour. The town where I went to high school had about 8000 people, several chain stores, and several small businesses. The high school I attended is the same school where Ms. Breanne now works. The high school I attended was built in the early 1900s, with the original girl's and boy's entrances still displayed. Internally, several renovations have removed any remaining signs that the school had such an historical essence.

In contrast, the school where I presently work was built in the 1960s, and very few structural renovations have been completed since then. One of the major exceptions is the science labs, which were opened for the first time in September 2009—and I was lucky enough to be one of the first teachers working in these rooms. The science labs are state of the art—with a SMART<sup>TM</sup> Board in every room and well-designed lab areas. I love working in these classrooms, and often forget that most of the teachers at the school do not use technology on a daily basis as I do. I think the pride the teachers feel about the science labs has spread to the students, with the number of students enrolled in optional science courses increasing. Students working in these new classrooms do not feel disadvantaged because they attend an old school—they know they have one of the best science labs in the school board, and are able to be proud of their school for this. Many of the other areas in the school have not been updated since the school was built over 50 years ago. Most students do not feel pride in their school's appearance, and the physical place where the students learn is often mistreated. This lack of school pride is evident in the ill manner in which the students speak of their school, which unfortunately extends into the community and the outside perception of the school.

The rural setting of the schools is restrictive in many ways—for example in order to compete against other schools in sports, students must be bussed at least 20 km. The cost of bussing is a significant factor in deciding which opportunities students will be offered. In recent years, the number of sports offered at the school where I teach has been cut in half. In addition to challenges faced by most schools, rural schools face an additional and different set of issues. “Rurality itself does not necessarily put students at risk for lower literacy achievement. Rather, rurality is associated with and interacts with other literacy risk factors” (Canadian Council on Learning, 2008, p. 12). There are limited resources available for teachers to access. For example, our school is visited by a Child and Youth Counsellor about every other week. This is not enough. The allocations of services such as described above are based on population, not need.

The underlying sociality issue governing both Amy and Shane is poverty. The poverty Shane and Amy experience at home invades all aspects of their life, and influences their actions at home, at school, and in the community.

Although there are many problems associated with childhood poverty, among the most striking is the impact of poverty on education. Poor children fare worse in school and are less likely to graduate from high school. This is a critical problem because there is a clear relationship between one’s educational level and earning potential. (Truscott & Truscott, 2005, p. 125)

Ms. Breanne and I do not live the same day-to-day struggles Shane and Amy do, and it is difficult for us to imagine their daily routines. Amy and Shane try to advocate for themselves, but often their actions go unrecognised or unheard in a meaningful way. Shane does not have close friends, and his mother is home dealing with problems of her

own. He needs confidants with whom he can talk, but I don't believe these needs are being met. I am at a loss to find a way to help Shane have success enough to get even a single credit this year. Ms. Breanne feels Amy will not be able to be successful without assistance from someone like herself who, she feels, needs to tell Amy what to say and do at every instance. As a teacher, I wonder where my role as an educator ends and my role as a social worker begins. I have been trained in content and in how to teach—but I do not know how to help students meet their social needs. I often wonder what I should do in these situations.

Sometimes the passage of time helps us to see things more clearly, but as teachers, if too much time is allowed to pass, the student will have graduated or left the school. The stories of Shane and Amy are similar; however, the chronological time of the stories is very different. The story Ms. Breanne shared of Amy happened several years ago, and my story of Shane happened very recently. This is a demonstration of the timeless challenges between students and teachers. These stories bring us back in time; the stories will influence our teaching in the future. We think about our students in the present, and draw similarities between them and students we have had in the past. These students have left an impression on us, and as we remember the experiences we have had with them, our future teaching practices will be altered.

Through reflecting on both the story Ms. Breanne shared of her experiences with Amy, and my own story of Shane, I have begun to re-examine my teaching. I have realised how important it is to listen to student voice, not only for academic reasons as I have in the past, but to also find ways to identify the hidden messages students may be trying to relay to me. Students can and will author and advocate for themselves, and I

have realised that they will do this in a variety of ways. The difficulty for me will be recognising and listening, as well as playing a role I am comfortable with, and despite the boundaries I face as an educator.

### **Lost Passion, Lost Inspiration**

After high school, Cassie attended post-secondary school in Toronto, and has remained there ever since. The urban lifestyle suits her, and she does not have pleasant words to say about the community where we grew up. She feels it is a close-minded society, unwelcoming of those who are different or even new. She feels her elementary experience was successful only because she persevered, and made it successful. She feels many of the teachers obtained positions at the school even though they could not teach—and would not have been tolerated in more urban centres where standards of practice would have been expected and teachers would have been held more accountable for their actions. She shared a story of Shawn that highlights this perspective. Shawn was a student at our elementary school, approximately 20 years ago—for several years he was our classmate. He was a larger boy with few close friends. He did not excel academically or physically, and was often the victim of bullying. Cassie wrote this story as she remembered it happening as a Grade 4 student. Although I was not in this class, Ms. Thomas had been my teacher the year before. Cassie titled this story “The Show Down”.

Ms. Thomas is teaching. I pay extra close attention. She can tell when we’re not listening. Also, there’s no talking in our class so I have to understand now. I can’t ask my neighbour later when we get the assignment. I’m sure we’ll have an assignment, she doesn’t talk for fun. Her voice is very strong and commanding.



This particular lesson seems to be going on for a long time. My mind wanders. I look at the teacher's hair. It's cut like a boy's. I've never seen a lady with hair so short. I imagine that she doesn't have a family because she doesn't look like a mom. I hope we get to watch a movie this afternoon. Hum, it looks cold outside; I'll have to be slow eating my lunch so I can stay in longer.

"SHAWN! Bla bla bla?"

Oh boy. Shawn was just asked a question. I'm so relieved that it wasn't me. I look at Shawn. I don't think he knows the answer. He's just sitting there. He's in the middle of the front row and Ms. Thomas is standing right in front of him, leaning over him in a menacing way. It's obvious she doesn't like him. Shawn isn't a good student and he doesn't have the qualities that most of the people have who aren't good students. He's not funny or athletic, and his nose is always runny. The question is repeated. Shawn remains mute.

"Well, do you know the answer or don't you?"

Shawn admits that he doesn't know. I get the distinct feeling that the answer was just covered moments before the question was asked. This is confirmed by the lecture we promptly get after Shawn's admission that he doesn't know the answer. We are reminded how important listening is and that we're wasting the teacher's time if we're not paying attention. Shawn looks very upset; this is certainly an embarrassing moment for him. The speech seems to be winding down but then...

"Now SHAWN, don't bother turning on the waterworks."

Well, this is a bad situation. Shawn cries almost every day. He's often put on the spot, but this was a little more than usual, even for him. Don't cry Shawn, don't cry! I'm thinking it so hard, over and over I repeat those words and I imagine that I'm sending the thought into his head. I know he doesn't want to cry. How embarrassing, this is Grade 4 after all. Most of us haven't cried at school in years. His lip is quivering and his face is red. Come on Shawn, just a few more seconds and she'll stop staring at you and we can go back to listening as a group, come on, you can do it! Be strong!

He puts his head down on his desk.

Then Shawn cries. A lot. (Story written by Cassie, March 18<sup>th</sup>, 2011)

As a student in her class, it seemed like Ms. Thomas was 100 years old—she was grumpy, strict and perpetually angry. In reality, Ms. Thomas was likely in her early 50s. My aunt, my father's youngest sister, who is 14 years older than myself had Ms. Thomas as a teacher and warned me to stay out of her way. I wonder if she had always been the way she was to our class, or if something happened along the way to sour her outlook on her students. Ms. Thomas was not working within the ethical standards of practice (Ontario College of Teachers, 2006). I was in her class and know that her interaction with Shawn was not an isolated event. She ruled by fear, and students who were not able to keep up were belittled and left behind. "There is no doubt that if schools were to become more nurturing and supportive, students would be more likely to perceive schools as a source of help and opportunity rather than an inhospitable place where one should seek to escape and actively avoid" (Noguera, 2003, p. 455). As good students, at least in our own minds, Cassie and I were not often the target of Ms. Thomas's attacks—

and to us at the time, it truly felt like there was the possibility we were going to be attacked. We were not used to confrontation. At home it was rare for our parents to raise their voices at us, and it was frightening when she yelled. We did everything in our power to escape her detection.

Unfortunately, Ms. Thomas' classroom mannerisms bring to mind one of my current colleagues. Mr. Baxter is a pseudonym for a person I work with. Many facets of the story that follows are masked and some are fictionalized so as to retain anonymity. Comments made about Mr. Baxter represent my own narrative impression, and not the sentiments of anyone else. Mr. Baxter is in the middle of his teaching career. He seems to struggle through each day. The students say awful things to him and as an observer I am in tension with his teaching rapport and how the students treat him. I struggle to understand his teaching discipline strategies, which I feel are inappropriate for today's 21<sup>st</sup> century classroom. To me, it appears that he does not respect the students, and in return, the students have no respect for him. The following story describes my personal impression of the continuous struggles of an unhappy teacher, and the effects that some teachers have on present-day students at the school where I teach.

Mr. Baxter was hired to our school as a member of the arts department. He was hired to a thriving program. Ten years later, at a time when arts programs in neighbouring schools are experiencing a revival of interest, the subject he teaches at our school has crumbled to one class per year. Mr. Baxter says kids just aren't interested in the arts anymore – however students are often seen sitting in small groups playing guitars at lunch, participating in extracurricular drama presentations, and entering drawing and painting competitions. The school's

annual talent show and student band competition are always full and competitive. Since Mr. Baxter began teaching at the school, the general enrolment has decreased significantly. Many course options have been eliminated, and elective courses such as music, drama, and art, been hit especially hard. Due to the lowered enrolment, Mr. Baxter's teaching load has shifted away from the courses he is passionate about and is heavily weighted with his other teachable subjects.

It is as though teaching overwhelms Mr. Baxter. It seems that he is constantly exasperated or in conflict with a student, a parent, or the administration. I have witnessed these conflicts, although presented by the administration as a hypothetical situation, discussed at staff meetings. I would feel humiliated and embarrassed if I were him during these meetings, and I equally feel sorry for him during meetings where he is singled out, regardless of the administration's 'hypothetical scenarios'. I wonder if Mr. Baxter has reached his breaking point, or if his passion for his profession has been lost. It seems that everyone and everything is against him.

This semester, Mr. Baxter and I have several of the same students. Although I enjoy having these students in my class, they seem to antagonise Mr. Baxter. I feel that patience, listening, and understanding have been the key to my success with students. Almost every day at lunch, Mr. Baxter will speak to me across the staffroom saying things like "Jacob is an awful kid. He needs one-on-one support, don't you think?" I do not feel it appropriate to speak about students in a public setting, and I always find an excuse to leave the room to escape further discussion. His statements in the staffroom have made me increasingly

uncomfortable, and I wonder what kinds of frustrations a person must feel if they need to vent their anger in such a way. Further, I am unhappy with myself, and how I have been dealing with these circumstances. Are there better ways for me to deal with this situation and perhaps turn it into a more positive experience, or should I continue to run away? How are these interactions shaping my own identity as a teacher?

Last Tuesday, Mr. Baxter seemed ecstatic at lunch. He said to me, “Did you hear that Jacob’s parents are pulling him out of school to work full time?” I was very disheartened to hear this—despite the legalities of it, Jacob is only 16—every once and a while a student will leave school to work. I hoped this was not the case, as Jacob’s future employment opportunities would be severely limited if he left school with only a Grade 10 education.

During period 3, I was speaking to a student in the Resource Room, when Jacob came to me and said he needed “everything he was missing” so he could bring his marks up. He had a very serious look on his face, and I wonder if there was truth behind what Mr. Baxter had said at lunch. I was more than happy to help Jacob catch up with his missing work. I wonder whether or not other teachers are supporting Jacob in his efforts to get caught up as well. (Personal Reflection, May 8<sup>th</sup>, 2011)

I often wonder why teachers like Ms. Thomas and Mr. Baxter remain in the teaching profession. Mr. Baxter seems to have a poor rapport with students, and makes decisions about their capabilities and achievement capacity early in the semester. “If students do not believe that their teachers care about them and are actively concerned about their

academic performance, the likelihood that they will succeed is greatly reduced” (Noguera, 2003, p. 449). There are many students faced with challenges who attend our school, and behavioural challenges are a common occurrence. Whose role is it to offer professional development in behaviour management? How can teachers such as Mr. Baxter and Ms. Thomas come to terms with their own tensions in teaching? Whose responsibility is it to support teachers who find themselves in such professional tension? My experience has been that understanding and giving students a ‘fresh start’ can improve almost any teacher-student relationship. Students’ interest in learning and their belief that they can learn are critical to their success (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010a). It seems obvious, from my perspective, that Mr. Baxter is very unhappy at our school. He continually applies for teaching positions elsewhere. He is trying to find a school where he can teach the subjects he is passionate about, which is something he is unable to do in his current teaching situation. It may be an unfortunate coincidence for him that the majority of principals and vice principals in our board have also taught with Mr. Baxter while they were still teaching. I wonder whether he continually gets overlooked for the positions which he applies for because of his past experiences with colleagues? I can only imagine how demoralizing this must be to him. Perhaps these frustrations are also reflected in his classroom behaviour. As a colleague, I find it difficult to hear of Mr. Baxter’s problems with students. As a beginning teacher, I feel empowered and rejuvenated through my interactions with students. I am uncomfortable with what I have observed of Mr. Baxter’s educational pedagogy. Perhaps I have not witnessed enough of his classroom interactions, and what I have seen is not representative of the true essence of his teaching. I am afraid that as time goes by I may

lose the passion I currently feel for teaching, and begin to reflect the behaviours and attitudes exhibited by Mr. Baxter and perhaps countless other teachers like him in our teaching profession.

Unlike Ms. Breanne, who goes above and beyond to save her students (despite following deficit theories), Mr. Baxter and Ms. Thomas perpetuate the collapse of their students, and hinder their learning. How can school culture, teaching practice, and policy change protect students from a continued lack of ethical standards, especially as they affect the most vulnerable of students in challenging circumstances?

### **Understanding the teacher-student relationship in time, place, and sociality**

Ms. Thomas and Mr. Baxter's stories demonstrate the importance of good teaching practice and teacher-student relationship. Returning to the commonplaces of narrative inquiry (Clandinin, 2006), I examine the three dimensional space of sociality by looking at the two teachers and the students involved in the previous stories. Ms. Thomas and Mr. Baxter and their seeming inability to relate to their students are reflected in how their students respond to them. For students like Cassie and myself, our fear drove us to do our best—however, in most cases our internal desire to please the teacher, as well as our parents, also compelled us to do our best. For other students in our class, the belittling and negative comments Ms. Thomas directed at us had opposite effects—it turned students off learning and school. Mr. Baxter finds ways to justify his difficulties in the classroom and shifts the blame to the students. This does not make for a healthy teacher-student rapport or school climate, in general.

In comparison, Ms. Thomas was married with two children. When our school had a ski day, her daughters came along—one of them was the same age as Cassie and I. The

way Ms. Thomas interacted with her daughters was completely unlike the way she interacted with her students. She was caring and protective, thoughtful and kind. The interaction between Ms. Thomas and her daughters made me realise that she was a real person, and not an ogre who lived at the school. After that trip, I tried to see her differently. But I wonder about her persona as a teacher and whether she was doing what all the other teachers did at school and whether it was an issue of power and control or an issue of caring for students, or an issue of teaching authoritatively because that was the culture and climate of our school back then.

Cassie felt that Ms. Thomas was representative of teachers in our small elementary school who felt stuck in their jobs. The place and the community where the schools are located are not idyllic. During our conversation, Cassie expressed concern that the community was “not attracting the best and brightest of professionals.” She continued by explaining that she sees it as a place where,

People are used to accepting what is the norm and not questioning what goes on in a classroom. [Bad teaching is] kind of just allowed to perpetuate itself. Maybe in the city it wouldn't be tolerated. It ends up being people who can't cut it—find themselves in a community like that. Almost like the leftovers. (Conversation with Cassie, March 18<sup>th</sup>, 2011)

I both agree, and disagree with Cassie's assessment of teachers in small communities like where we grew up, and where I currently teach. I teach in the same school as Mr. Baxter, and do not feel that my teaching is substandard. However, in our school board—as in many across Ontario—student enrolment is decreasing. Since 2002, overall enrolment in Ontario elementary and secondary schools has declined by nearly 90,000 students



(People for Education, 2008). Each year, teachers are surplusd or released from their teaching positions, and as a newer teacher, I feel grateful to have a job. More important, I feel privileged to teach where I do, because I think it's a great school. On the other hand, for experienced teachers, their job is very secure. However, as in the case of Mr. Baxter, teachers may not have the opportunity to teach the courses they are passionate about. Teachers are backed by a strong union, which makes termination and just cause a difficult action for school board officials to pursue when it is believed that teachers are not abiding by the professional and ethical standards of practice (Ontario College of Teachers, 2006). In many ways Mr. Baxter and his teaching practices are caught in a destructive cycle. He has many negative experiences while at work, which seem unending. These negative experiences lead to frustration. When he is unable to deal with the mounting frustrations, his teaching pedagogy perhaps suffers. Negative comments from students can be hurtful. I wonder how I would react if students spoke to me as they do to him. Would I be able to maintain my composure and enthusiasm for teaching? Mr. Baxter was included in the group of 15 teachers, who were randomly selected to undergo the Teacher Performance Appraisal (TPA) process this year. Teachers undergo the TPA every five years. The TPA process is meant to provide "meaningful appraisals that encourage professional learning and growth" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2011c). The TPA may be yet another pressure and aspect to add to any teacher's stress, like Mr. Baxter's, which can play on a teacher's self confidence, happiness and wellbeing. Surrounded by so much negativity, what would I do in a similar situation?

Ms. Thomas at the time of the Show Down, as well as Mr. Baxter from my present-day teaching experience, were both in the middle of their careers. For them, the

eagerness and excitement of being a new teacher is gone. Time does not allow them to identify themselves as beginning teachers, nor as teachers reaching the end of their careers. I wonder why teachers like Mr. Baxter and Ms. Thomas remain in the teaching profession, when they seem so unhappy. Is it the job security? Is it the fear of starting again in a new career?

As I reflect on the teaching practices of both Mr. Baxter and Ms. Thomas, I consciously know the kind of teacher I do not want to be. I have experienced teaching that is not reflective of the spirit behind the ethical standards of practice (Ontario College of Teachers, 2006), both as a student and as a colleague looking on from the side lines. Experiencing this type of teaching, from various perspectives, drives me to improve my own professional practices, but also inspires me to reach out to students and make connections beyond those in the classroom. I hope to maintain my enthusiasm by being actively engaged in the school community. In my experience, I feel invigorated by being involved in extracurricular and activities outside the classroom, and this enthusiasm spreads to my classroom teaching. Relationships with students inspire me to continue my own learning journey. I strive to see what is in the stories students share—including the essential elements the students have omitted to protect themselves, their identity, their families, et cetera. In the last few years, I have learned to identify and work through my own deficit model of thinking through my research and teaching experiences. Ginott (1975) describes my sentiments when he said,

I have come to a frightening conclusion. I am the decisive element in the classroom. It is my personal approach that creates the climate. It is my daily mood that makes the weather. As a teacher I possess tremendous power to make

a child's life miserable or joyous. I can be a tool of torture or an instrument of inspiration. I can humiliate or humor, hurt or heal. In all situations, it is my response that decides whether a crisis will be escalated or de-escalated, and a child humanized or de-humanized.

### **Investing in the Community**

My parents firmly believe in giving back to the community. When I was in Grade 7, my parents had me (12 years old), my sister (Grade 5), my brother (Grade 1) and a one- and two-year old at home. As our primary caregiver, my mother did not have much time to herself—or at all. However, she managed to attend monthly meetings for the local women's group she belonged to, as well as helped out as much as she could at the school. Sometimes we were left to fend for ourselves with our dad—which usually meant we were having toast and eggs for dinner, but we enjoyed the change. Uncharacteristically, for most farming fathers, my dad would volunteer to chaperone about one school trip a year. He even came on my Grade 8 end-of-year trip, which was overnight. As we older children became more self-sufficient and moved out, my mother especially became more involved in volunteering at the elementary school. As children, we all knew education was important, as it was a value strongly instilled in us by our parents.

All five of us have, or are pursuing, post-secondary education. We learned the value of education, not only from being told—but from watching our mother volunteer her time at the school. She chaperoned field trips, as well as participated on the parent council. The formation of parent councils to increase parental involvement in school decision-making causes a shift in power and authority (McKenna & Willms, 1998). As a member of this committee, she felt her opinion was being heard and her contributions to

the school were valued. She shared with me a story about a time when, due to declining enrolment, several elementary schools in the area were scheduled to close.

In 2005 [the elementary school] was one of the schools that were under review for closure.

Because I was a member of the School Council at that time we fought hard to keep our school open. We had to go to all the groups in [town] and get them behind us because they all use the school for different reasons. Church groups, exercise groups, night school committees, Girl Guides, Brownies, and the Recreation Committee—anyone who used the school or school grounds in any way.

We had lots of community support – no one wanted our school to close. When the Accommodation Review Committee met at [the high school]—we as a community had the most people present and speakers to why we should not lose our school.

We were all afraid but we came out on top, and are still open today. The school enrolment is going up. No more shut down for [the town].

We love our town. (Conversation with Nina, March 16<sup>th</sup>, 2011)

It was important for Nina to not only contribute to the school, but also, when the time came, fight to keep it open. She explained how she, along with other members of the community, did this;

Anyone who used our community school—church groups, exercise groups, night school, girl guides, brownies, recreation—we had to send them all letters and talk to them to say this is going on; they want to close our school—can you please help

us out. When we had [the meeting]—[our school] had the most parents, community support up at that meeting... People from the community came and said, “You have to keep the school open. That’s the meeting place. That’s the hub of the community”. (Conversation with Nina, March 16<sup>th</sup>, 2011)

In small communities, schools are more than buildings. During the day, they are places where students come to learn. But by night, they are meeting rooms, dance halls, and club houses. The Review Committee recognised that this school was not only a place where students could get an education, but also a place where the community met. By getting involved in the school through volunteerism, Nina gained a better understanding of what was happening in her children’s school, and was able to interact with her children’s classmates on a more intimate level than being so-and-so’s mom. In a small community, people are very reliant on one another. Farmers rely on other farmers for help to get the crops in. Small businesses rely on the community to make the choice to shop locally, rather than going to larger urban centres to make their purchases. People continually interact with the same people, but in a variety of ways that allow people to see each other in variety of roles, including parent, coach, bank teller, and fellow church patron. Nina continued on to share another example of volunteering at the school;

To some parents it would be a chore to help with track and field day, but when I was asked to go in—I said no problem. I could have stayed at home, or I could have been doing my gardening—I had lots of work to do the days of these field days, but then you’re in with the kid’s and your working with them, and you knew the kids names because they’re all your kids’ friends. (Conversation with Nina, March 16<sup>th</sup>, 2011)

Nina shared how her volunteerism benefitted both the school, in need of help—but benefitted her personally, by being able to interact with her children at school, and meeting her children’s friends and classmates. Additionally, she got to speak with the teachers on an informal basis. By building these relationships it became easier for Nina to make personal connections, and when the time came to speak about more difficult issues, like problems her children were having in school—these previously established relationships boosted her confidence, and allowed her to speak up and be an advocate for her children. I understand the sentiment of interacting with students under different circumstances, for me—coaching volleyball has helped me make this connection. When I was a student in elementary or secondary school, I distanced myself as much as possible from physical activity. I volunteered to help at track and field in Grades 7 through 9 to avoid the mandatory participation rules. I took gym class only once in high school, as my diploma requirement. What other students saw as a break from academic courses, I considered torture. I would have never imagined that I would coach a high school sport—let alone enjoy the experience thoroughly, and look forward to the next season. The following story describes how, mostly by accident, I got involved in school sports, and the effect it has had on me both personally and professionally.

It was my first week of teaching at the school. Another teacher approached me and asked if I was interested in coaching. Eager to please, I explained that I had no experience but would be happy to help out. A couple weeks into the volleyball season I thought I had made a mistake. This sport was taking up a lot of my life, and I struggled to find the balance between finding time to coach, and finding time to plan, and mark for my courses.

Once I found the balance, I began to see the rewards. Most of the volleyball players were not my students—but they began to say “hi” to me in the hall, and soon their friends knew who I was too. Being a new teacher at a school is hard—but coaching has helped me to interact with students in new ways. Rather than seeing me only as a science teacher, I hope they also see me as someone who cares about them and wants them to succeed. They know I am taking time away from my personal life to hang out with them for 2 hours a day, 4 days a week—and they appreciate it. It is very rewarding, and I can’t wait for September when the new season starts. (Personal Reflection, May 22<sup>nd</sup> 2011)

For me as a teacher, it is always encouraging to see a student who struggles in my class but excels in a sport because I am glad they are able to find success in some facet of their life. It reminds me that academic achievement is not always a student’s personal goal, as it was for me when I was in school.

When teaching [classes], teachers attend to many students of varying levels of ability, to whom [the subject] is made compulsory as a subject in a school curriculum. On the other hand, when coaching, the teachers aim to help relatively small numbers of highly motivated student-athletes who usually participate voluntarily, enhance their skills, and fulfill their potential to achieve sporting excellence. (Kwon, Pyun, & Kim, 2010, p. 132)

Like Nina and her participation at her children’s elementary school, I found a new and rewarding way to interact with students; we have both changed the social relationships with children, some of whom we already knew and others whom we have met for the first

time. Successful schools often contain unconventional leaders, such as support staff and parents (Ciuffetelli Parker et al., 2009).

**Discovering our role as volunteers in time, place, and sociality.**

Nina's story of participating on the school council and my experience as a coach demonstrate the importance of community involvement. The schools where Nina and I volunteer feel open and welcoming to us. The commonplace of place is more than a building, but somewhere we are needed, and able to make a difference. "Welcoming parents means more than welcoming them in the school building; it means welcoming them into the processes of schooling in the multiple ways they deem significant" (Pushor, 2007, p. 10). Although originally designed as a building for students to come and learn, in small communities school take on a much larger role, as places for after-hours clubs to meet, community events to be held, and lives to be shaped. As a student, schools were the places where I met life-long friends like Cassie, discovered my interests and the potential the world could offer me; university was the place where I planned my future as an adult, and now I return to a school each day to help students on their own journeys and guide them on their paths to adulthood. It is impossible to think of the role of a school as a building where students come to learn without recognising and taking into account the variety of interactions between the people in the building each day. What may seem like insignificant events could have life-long effects and recognition of the importance of the personal interactions going-ons in the school are very important.

For Nina and I, developing informative relationships between students, parents, and teachers is personally rewarding—and we feel our contribution is valued. Schools can be successful, despite challenging circumstances, when all facets of the neighbourhood



work together towards a common goal (Ciuffetelli Parker et al., 2009). The sociality and interactions between teachers, parents, students, and the community can have lasting effects, and can either help or hinder the good works within the school. The perception of the community is very important to a school—a good perception can bring more volunteers to the school, bring more speakers to the students, and bring resources to the classroom they might otherwise not experience. Additionally, students reap the benefit of after-school activities and coaches and volunteers show mentoring through actions and the importance of citizenship and giving back to the community. It is important to bring the community into the school, and see the good works the students are doing. A positive community image can do great things for the school. It can bring the community and the school together, and encourage relationships that better the students' educational experiences. Epstein and Sanders (2006) state “students learn more and succeed at higher levels when home, school, and community work together to support students' learning and development” (p. 87).

In the moment, we are donating our time to students. My parents have modelled this behaviour for me all my life, and as an adult I feel a responsibility to pass it forward and give back to the school that has given me so much. I know the students on the volleyball team understand that I am coaching on my own time, but happy to do it. My hope is that as they move forward in their own lives, they will also find the time to give back to the community. As teachers, some of our time at school is mandated: when to arrive, how long to must stay et cetera. However, teachers use their time very differently, and the use of time is what effects students. Opening the classroom at lunch time, for extra help or extracurricular clubs means teachers have to spend more of their own time

marking, and planning their lessons—however, what will students remember after they’ve left the school, and think about their experiences? I wonder if students recognise the activities teachers provide outside their job requirements.

From those first days when I was thrown into coaching volleyball, it seemed very overwhelming. I stayed late four nights a week coaching, and then spent hours at home planning and marking for the next day. I had very little time for myself, and sometimes felt as though I would never catch up. As I have grown as a teacher, and as I have become more comfortable in my professional role, I have taken on more extra curricular activities—coaching three sports last year, as well as helping to lead a social club and after-school activities. This means I still spend hours of my own time marking and planning, but these activities become easier with experience. I value the time I spend with students outside the classroom, and look for new opportunities each year to become involved. For me, my journey as a teacher has been much more than academics. Sociality is very important to me as a teacher, as are the relationships I develop with my students, and with my teaching colleagues. I have cultivated important relationships with my peers, with whom I can share trials and triumphs of my day to day teaching. As a developing teacher, these peer relationships help me to make meaning of my experiences and use my newly formed teacher knowledge to relive a new way of understanding my teaching world (Ciuffetelli Parker, 2010d, p. 1259)

In Chapter Five, I review the experiences and lessons learned from this research experience. I discuss what the findings mean for me both professionally, and personally, as well as outline implications for other teachers. Finally, I describe next steps and future research possibilities.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: SUMMARY OF FINDINGS**

This chapter provides a summary of the study, as well as outlines implications and recommendations based on the findings for other educators.

### **Summary of the Study**

Participants for the study were chosen because I believed they would have meaningful and insightful stories to share, which would help me on my journey of discovery. The participants consisted of one male (my father) and four females, including myself. Participants were recruited using the Letter of Invitation (see Appendix A) as cleared by the Brock University Research Ethics Board (REB# 09-274). After receiving the Letter of Invitation, participants were asked to read and sign the Informed Consent Letter (see Appendix B). After informed consent had been obtained, I arranged a time to meet with each participant. My parents were interviewed together. Prior to meeting with participants, I shared my own stories of education (for examples, see Appendix C) with participants. Participants were asked to write down three stories that they felt were pivotal in describing their experiences with the education system in their community, and bring them to our meeting. They were asked to share stories that defined their role, either as a teacher, student, or parent. These stories, along with my own, formed the basis of conversation for our meetings.

The first person I interviewed was Ms. Breanne, my seventh grade teacher. As a student, I thought she was fantastic, fun and I couldn't wait to be in her class. As an elementary teacher, she taught in all divisions. Later, Ms. Breanne developed and worked at a SALEP (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010b) for seven years, working with high risk, high need students. Recently, she has begun working in a high school as a

Student Success teacher (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2011b). In this role, Ms. Breanne is responsible for helping students who are struggling, who need extra attention to help them graduate or who are looking for new challenges in high school (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2011b). The second person I interviewed was Cassie. We have been friends since elementary school. Her parents, like mine, are farmers. Many aspects of her upbringing were similar to my own, and I see her as my mirror image (Ciuffetelli Parker & Cherubini, 2008). She was selected as a participant because I felt she had gone through many of the same experiences as I did, and I was eager to find out if her perceptions of the school were similar, or if they resonated (Conle, 1996) with my own. She has worked as a property assessor in York Region for approximately 10 years. Finally, I interviewed my parents, Nina and Grant. Both of my parents were born in 1957, and have worked as farmers for their entire married life (since 1979). Although my father was also born and raised on a dairy farm, my mother was not. My father did not bring any written stories to share during the interview, and left the conversation before it was completed. As such, his insights did not lead to any essential findings, and he is not quoted in this project. He is thus considered as participant-observer in this study. Finally, I also take the role of participant in this project. I completed my teacher training in Australia in 2006, and worked there for six months before returning to Ontario. I have been teaching (both supply and contract) in Ontario since 2007. I am currently employed as a secondary school teacher in southern Ontario, where I teach mostly science classes.

Throughout our discussions, I asked participants various open-ended questions (Appendix D), so that the participants “can best voice their experiences unconstrained by any perspectives of the researcher” (Creswell, 2008, p. 225). At the conclusion of each

discussion, I composed field notes describing my thoughts and feelings about the discussion. This process helped me to later portray the relational circumstances of the situation in the field text (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 95).

The meetings were digitally (audio) recorded. After I met with each participant individually, I transcribed the recordings of our meeting. Once the recordings were transcribed, I coded the data. The coding was done by organising and managing the most meaningful bits of data by assigning tags or labels to the data (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). I analysed the transcripts, my own field notes, as well as the stories the participants had chosen to share with me using this method. After the coding process was complete, I looked for patterns and themes that emerged. The themes developed were: student authorship, good teaching practice, and parental and community involvement.

Throughout this study, my role has been both that of participant and of researcher. This duality has allowed me to use investigative techniques to unlock memories and gather stories from the participants of the study, while at the same time I have been able to explore my own experiences in greater detail than is normal for me. I used narrative inquiry to explore the experiences of people living and working in rural communities, where I attempted to draw out stories of school and school stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 1996) that have influenced the participants and me; these are stories that have been regarded as significant. The participants of the study were all familiar to me and important figures in my childhood, including a favourite teacher, a former classmate, and my parents. At one time, we all lived or worked in the same rural community and interacted on a daily basis within a small community elementary school. The community surrounding the school was, and continues to struggle with challenges of poverty and

unemployment. I gathered experiences through stories, from people who have played significant roles in my personal, educational, and professional life, and used their experiences to validate and contrast my own.

Although our roles in the school varied as teachers, students, and parents, the school played a significant role in all our lives. The place (Clandinin, 2006) shaped our daily lives from the past, but also altered our future. Although I now work in a different community, the struggles of the school place are familiar and reflective of the community where I attended elementary school and the focus for the stories gathered participants wrote. The stories that were brought to the surface from the participants, including from myself, helped me to understand the school community from my past and the one from my present, both of which face challenges of poverty. These stories helped me to gain insight into how I can relate these stories and experiences to my current role as a teacher working in a similar, rural high school. Additionally, I believe other educators will be able to relate these stories to their own experiences, and possibly seek to improve their own professional practice as I have. This study has helped me to understand myself as a teacher and provided insights to improve my own professional practice and to understand the conditions students face while living in challenging circumstances in our 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **Discussion**

Before the study, I had already begun a process of personal reflection, where I was reconsidering the community where I was raised. My experiences as a research assistant (Ciuffetelli Parker, 2010a; Ciuffetelli Parker & Flessa, 2011) brought me to several elementary schools, for the first time since I was an elementary student myself. The sounds, sights, and smells of the schools brought back many memories. As I walked

through several of the schools, and listened to the teachers and administrators speak about the challenges of the community, I began to recognise similar characteristics in the community where I was raised. This was a strange moment for me, as my happy childhood never led me to suspect that people in our community were not blissfully going about life, as I was. I had many assumptions about people living in poverty, including that they had to be miserable and that their entire life focus must be on getting out of poverty at any expense. Through my experiences as a research assistant (Ciuffetelli Parker, 2010a; Ciuffetelli Parker & Flessa, 2011), I learned to check my biases and stereotypes, but I also learned that poverty is not as clear-cut as I initially imagined it to be. For the first time, I also began to look at the community where I teach, and saw with new eyes the experiences of the people living and working in that community. They were experiencing many of the same challenges as the community where I was raised. With my newly discovered insights, I decided I wanted to hear the stories of people who live and work in the community where I was raised, and listen to their experiences. From the stories they shared, I gathered insight into my own teaching, and I am finding ways to apply this new knowledge to my professional practice.

Before beginning this research, my suspicions were that there were and continue to be people in our community living in poverty, and that they are living at dire levels of poverty that I could have never imagined.

The rural poor are anybody... it's the farmer; the industrialist; it's the union worker whose plant is being shut down... What makes it rural is that there are no resources behind it. There is no factory on the other side of the street... When it's gone, it's gone. (One in Six: Education and Poverty in Ontario, 2008)

I knew poverty in rural areas looked differently than it does in more urban centres, and I wanted to listen and learn first-hand the ways that poverty had affected the community where I was raised. I have learned through this study process that, yes, people in the community where I was raised were living and working in poverty, but they were also thriving and leading happy lives. This is also true for the community where I now work.

While listening to the stories brought forth by Ms. Breanne, I was struck by many of the comments she made about students, and the “culture of poverty” in which they were living in. For example, she said “Jake came from generational poverty – meals consisted of processed food mainly pizza pockets” (Excerpt from story retold by Ms. Breanne, March 16<sup>th</sup> 2011). Immediately, I was brought back to the workshop series (Ciuffetelli Parker, 2010a) I attended as a research assistant, and the stereotypes that were discussed and nullified during that session. Again later, when discussing her concerns about how Amy would be perceived at her new school Ms. Breanne said,

She wouldn’t have been accepted by a group that would have promoted her to be successful because she wouldn’t have met their standards in the way she dressed and the way she kept her hair, although she tried so hard. (Interview with Ms. Breanne, March 16<sup>th</sup>, 2011).

Not only did Ms. Breanne make sweeping generalisations about the students she worked with, but also about how these students who come from lives of poverty would be perceived by the middle-class community. Both my curiosity and my concern were peaked. I recognised many of the terms Ms. Breanne was using as coming directly from the work of Ruby Payne (1996; Payne et al., 2001) but I had never experienced someone



who was so completely immersed by Payne's teachings. In explaining to me how and why intervention on the part of Amy was so important, Ms. Breanne said,

They say that in generational poverty, it is very important for them to be able to—what's expected of us is to show up every day and it's expected that we leave our problems at the door and we go in and we do our job. That's just accepted and expected. In generational poverty, studies have shown that they don't value that. They don't value that work ethic. They value relationships, and we value achievement. Everything we value is achievement and work ethic. Everything for them is relationships, because if they don't have relationships they have nothing.

(Interview with Ms. Breanne, March 16<sup>th</sup>, 2011)

During the transcription of the interview with Ms. Breanne, I realised it was important to investigate in detail how and why Ruby Payne (1996; Payne et al., 2001) made the claims she has. I hope this project has demonstrated the inconsistencies and issues associated with her research, as well as deficit model thinking. In my own professional considerations, I have learned how detrimental deficit model thinking can be to both students and educational providers. I believe it is important to look at children and see what is there, rather than look at children and see what is missing (Ciuffetelli Parker & Flessa, 2011; Flessa, 2006; Valencia, 1997).

For me as a teacher, it is important to listen and try to understand when students are experiencing difficulties and know that although I have not experienced many of their life experiences first hand, I get it, and I can be an excellent teacher. "To 'get it' means that teachers understand the complexities involved in learning curriculum and in adapting to the needs of learners" (Ciuffetelli Parker & Flessa, 2011, p. 41). I have also learned

that I can make a difference and, by adhering to best practices that are both academically and socially based, I am confident that I will be successful in my teaching career. “We know that a caring adult in the school who takes an interest in a student can make all the difference for those on the verge of dropping out” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008, p. 7). Although the stories from the participants in this study happened more than a decade ago, the themes that have come out in the findings are still relevant and prevalent today. The themes of student authorship, good teaching practice, and community engagement and how they influence my own teaching practice is discussed in further detail in the sections that follow.

### **Student Authorship**

Ms. Breanne presented the story of Amy. She saw Amy as a girl from a troubled home, with no resources, personal, physical, or social. While discussing Amy, and her perceived plight, she echoed closely the words of Ruby Payne (1996; Payne et al., 2001). She said “This is an example of providing advocacy for a family from generational poverty with lack of knowledge of how to navigate our middle-class institutions” (Excerpt from story retold by Ms. Breanne, March 16<sup>th</sup> 2011). Later, Ms. Breanne further explained that “she needed a lot” (Ms. Breanne, interview, March 16<sup>th</sup>, 2011), meaning that Amy needed a lot of support and guidance from her teacher, the school system, and social services. Ms. Breanne saw herself as the bridge between success and failure for Amy because based on the training she has received, specifically *Bridges Out of Poverty* (Payne et al., 2001) Ms. Breanne has been taught that people who live in poverty are missing key elements essential to survival in middle-class society. She assumed that Amy was unable to function within the school system due to deficits in her social skills.

Like Ms. Breanne, I was also unable to identify the hidden way a student came to me looking for help. Initially, when dealing with Shane I continued to be frustrated and blamed him for his unwillingness to participate and cooperate in his own learning. He refused to follow the protocol of acceptable behaviour in a classroom, he would not write anything down, he would not turn off his music, and he would not put his cell phone away. As a teacher, I felt trapped between feelings of frustration and duty-bound helplessness. I was frustrated because Shane continually refused my assistance, and helpless because I felt obligated to send him to the office, which I knew was not helping him either. Only after listening to the subtle clues Shane shared with me, I finally understood that his unwillingness was a deeply rooted defence mechanism to protect himself from feelings of failure.

Both Amy and Shane were authoring their own stories, in unconventional ways. “Each of us is authoring his/her own life while at the same time being a character in lives authored by others” (Olson & Craig, 2001, p. 668). As a character in the lives of others, teachers can influence their students’ every day, and it is important for teachers to listen to students who are speaking softly, or even silently. Olson (2008) shares that our best practice is continuously informed, inspired, and reformed through valuing the evolving narrative authority of each individual (p. 393). As an elementary and then secondary student, it was very difficult for me to share the difficulties I was having with anyone, especially those I saw to be authority figures. Although speaking my own voice has gotten easier as I became an adult, I think I am intuitively aware when students are reluctant to open up to me—as I was reluctant to open up to teachers as a child. Even as a Master of Education student, I often hesitated during classes to share my thoughts—or

required more time to ponder my response than other students did. This often meant I missed opportunities to take part in discussions and to share my ideas. Students learn, not only from the teacher—but from their peers as well, and teachers need to take the time to listen to students. This theme is important to my teaching practice because it has made me give pause and take a step back. It is very easy to get wrapped up in the day-to-day fast pace of life in a school, but it is more important to use the time I have with the students to not only make sure they're learning, but also to make sure I am listening to them and they're listening to me.

### **Good Teaching Practice**

Cassie shared a story of Ms. Thomas, who ruled her classroom by fear. Cassie's sentiments are evident in her statement "She can tell when we're not listening. Also, there's no talking in our class so I have to understand now" (Cassie, written story, March 18, 2011). Cassie is afraid of being called upon, because it would mean instant humiliation—whether she knew the answer or not. In my memories, Ms. Thomas's strict classroom setting caused students a great deal of stress—something I had not experienced before. My Grade 3 teacher opened each day with a song, often brought his guitar to class, and wrote each of us a personalised book for our birthdays. Moving from this environment in Grade 3, to Ms. Thomas' class in Grade 4 was quite a shock. For Cassie, the stress and anxiety caused by the potential for public ridicule forced her to pay close attention, and do her very best. Unfortunately for students like Shawn, this stress manifested physical breakdowns and resulted in further humiliation and anxiety.

My examination of Mr. Baxter and his actions at school is not so much a critique of his actions, but an unveiling of my own insecurities and fears of teaching. My own

experiences with Mr. Baxter and other teachers who behave like him force me to continually examine my teaching practices and wonder whether or not I am doing a good job. Mr. Baxter has provided a lived example for me of how I do not want to act or present myself to my students or to my colleagues. Teachers in Ontario are bound and guided by the Standards of Professional Practice as outlined by the Ontario College of Teachers (2006). These standards “articulate the goals and aspirations of a teaching profession dedicated to fostering student learning and preparing Ontario students to participate in a democratic society” (Ontario College of Teachers, 2006, p. 4). These guidelines for good teaching practice help teachers maintain a standard and professionalism amongst ourselves, so that educators can be proud of our profession and the work being done. The four ethical standards for professional practice, care, respect, trust and integrity (Ontario College of Teachers, 2006, p. 5) are signposts for teachers to live by, and lead by example. I believe that “good education is about building trust, safety, and community, just as much as it is about building knowledge” (Feuerverger, 2011, p. 88). Good teaching practice is important to me as a teacher, because although I am only at the beginning of my teaching career, I am becoming more and more comfortable in my role as a teacher. I no longer feel as though I am impersonating a teacher, I have embraced the role of teacher and I try to embody the role each and every day. Through the telling and retelling of stories of school and school stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 1996), I have come to better understand the importance of professionalism in teaching.

However, I still struggle each and every day in an attempt to balance my varied roles as a teacher, listener, and counsellor with my duties as a professional. Perhaps, as

Feuerverger (2011) suggests “it is a matter of acknowledging our struggle to make sense of our own lives as we confront the lives of students in classrooms every day” (pg. 73). I am acutely aware that I have much to learn about being a teacher, and hope that I am never fully satisfied with my performance. This study has helped me to understand that good teaching is a practice, never quite perfected—that it can always be improved upon.

### **Parental and Community Engagement**

My mother Nina shared her story of being a parent who was engaged in her children’s school in a way that was meaningful for her and made her feel valued. Pushor (2007) describes parental engagement as parents “doing activities which are mutually determined by educators and parents to be important for children and are lived out in a respectful and reciprocal relationship” (p. 6). In addition to being involved at the school in ways such as helping with pizza day and field events, Nina was also part of the parent council who made decisions regarding student welfare and learning, and saw those decisions honoured and implemented in the school. She described how at one parent council meeting they “looked at their Grade 3 and Grade 6 testing and between Grade 3 and 6 their Grade 6 tests showed that they had gone down in reading levels” (Interview with Nina, March 16, 2011). Being involved in the data analysis of the standardised testing validated Nina, and at the time she felt that the school not only respected her intelligence, but also valued her input into suggestions for success and ways to improve the test results.

It is not always easy for teachers to hand over responsibilities to parents and community members, and make them feel welcome in the school. “Teachers have a professional education, knowledge and experience, their claim on the ground of school is

accepted and they take ownership of this ground” (Pushor, 2007, p. 8). Parental engagement benefits not only the students and the school, but also the person volunteering. Ciuffetelli Parker and Flessa (2011) found that parents working in schools realised that their volunteerism has contributed to many positive aspects in their own lives. In my own experience, I have found coaching to be a way to connect with students on a personal level. Anecdotally, I have found that students I have coached take more of the elective science courses I teach. When it comes time to register for senior classes, sometimes the course subject matter is not the most important factor they use to weigh their decisions. Not only do they need to meet their graduation requirements, but they have already established a relationship with me as a person. As a coach, I feel I am helping students to find success in ways that my role as a teacher does not allow me to do. The unforeseen benefit of this coaching relationship is seen when students enrol in a science course because of our previously established relationship, and then as a teacher I help that student find success academically as well.

Whether parents are coming into the school, or teachers are working with students beyond the scope of the classroom, “bridging relationships between home and school takes effort from various people, including those based in the school” (Ciuffetelli Parker & Flessa, 2011, p. 65). Although I initially thought volunteering in a school was a way to help students, I have come to realise that the benefits are many-fold, and it is a situation where everyone wins.

### **Connections with Ministry of Education Documents**

The themes presented in this study connect with recent documents from the Ontario Ministry of Education. The Ministry of Education is also taking steps towards

helping students overcome barriers to their education, including poverty. In *Reach Every Student: Energizing Ontario Education* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008), teachers are recognised as important factors in helping students achieve success. The document states “poverty matters in education. But fortunately, Ontario educators are proving that poverty is not destiny” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008, p. 8). Another document, *Equity and Inclusive Education in Ontario Schools: Guidelines for Policy Development and Implementation* (Ontario Ministry of Education and Training, 2009) furthers the importance of the role of educators and administrators in not only recognising barriers faced by students, but also identifying the barriers and working together to overcome them:

Equity and inclusive education aim to understand, identify, address, and eliminate the biases, barriers, and power dynamics that limit students’ prospects for learning, growing, and fully contributing to society... It is now recognised that several factors may intersect to create additional barriers for some students. These barriers and biases, whether overt or subtle, intentional or unintentional, need to be identified and addressed. (Ontario Ministry of Education and Training, 2009, p. 6)

As identified in this study, one method of overcoming barriers students face in education is by listening to student voice, and recognising when students are advocating for themselves. “When students are engaged in their learning and social environment, they are better able to develop the skills and knowledge and grasp the opportunities that can help them reach their full potential, pursue lifelong learning, and contribute to a prosperous, cohesive society” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008, p. 12). In the story



of Amy, as told by Ms. Breanne, Amy was able to take control of her future by enrolling in a new school and elicited the help of a teacher she knew could help her. Ms. Breanne had not only gained Amy's trust, but also helped her discover her student voice.

Engagement is also important for teachers. Teachers often set the tone of the classroom, and the stories of Ms. Thomas and Mr. Baxter have shown us that teaching practices and the day-to-day interactions between teachers and students can have lasting effects. In her story, Cassie described her fear of being ridiculed by Ms. Thomas and was careful to pay close attention. She said "I can't ask my neighbour later when we get the assignment." This is not a positive learning environment, and Shawn's breakdown in class is evident of this. Positive teaching and learning environments are important not only to students, but also to teachers. "It is important for students, teachers, and staff to learn and work in an environment that is respectful, supportive, and welcoming to all" (Ontario Ministry of Education and Training, 2009, p. 6). The document *Equity and Inclusive Education in Ontario Schools: Guidelines for Policy Development and Implementation* (Ontario Ministry of Education and Training, 2009) further describes the Ministry of Education's vision of inclusion, which extends to welcoming parental and community support into schools. The document states, "We envision an equitable and inclusive education system in Ontario in which all students, parents, and other members of the school community are welcomed and respected" (Ontario Ministry of Education and Training, 2009, p. 5). Nina's story demonstrated how rewarding volunteering at their child's school can be for parents, but also how important it is for schools to welcome the community and parents into the school, and value their contributions.

Ultimately, our schools are called to partner with Ontario's parents to help students become the best they can be individually. But the schools' role is also to help students develop into highly skilled, knowledgeable, caring citizens who contribute to our strong economy and a cohesive society. (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2008, p. 2)

By working in partnerships, and developing relationships with our students, fellow teachers, and the surrounding community, this study has shown how beneficial and rewarding authentic relationships (Ciuffetelli Parker, 2011) can be relational for all parties involved. "Poverty is a complex issue. It requires every level to acknowledge the challenges and work to alleviate its impact" (Ciuffetelli Parker & Flessa, 2011, p. 106). The relationships and collaboration of parents, teachers, administrators, and students is vital to success.

### **Recommendations and Links to Theory**

Although this study has come to a close, I feel the themes drawn from the stories are applicable not only to my own teaching but also to other teachers working and living in similar communities. As a participant in this study, as well as the researcher, the themes identified in the study have given me perspective into my own teaching practices, and helped me to find ways to improve these practices. I believe other educators could also use the narratives in this study as a starting point for their own narrative experiences and storied reflections of their own professional practice. In this manner, this narrative inquiry study could lead to insightful reflection, reliving of teaching practices, and a call to action to improve communities of practice, especially in marginalized communities affected by poverty (Ciuffetelli Parker & Flessa, 2011).

This narrative inquiry has illustrated a method that explores participants' storied experiences; this inquiry has shared their stories with a wider audience in a way that is relatable and relational. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) tell us,

Education and educational studies are a form of experience. For us, narrative is the best way of representing and understanding experience. Experience is what we study, and we study it narratively because narrative thinking is a key form of experience and a key way of writing and thinking about it (p. 18).

As a researcher, it was my intention to seek out stories of experience, and find ways to share those experiences with a wider audience. This study has shown that the individual experiences of a variety of people, each having navigated education in their own way, can use stories to represent and help others understand their experiences. "Experience happens narratively. Narrative inquiry is a form of narrative experience. Therefore, educational experience should be studied narratively" (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. 19). By relating to the stories shared, educators can take their new understandings and apply it to their own professional practice. While navigating these stories using the methodology of narrative inquiry, the resulting findings further the current scholarly literature, especially related to issues of poverty, and education. In Ontario, poverty continues to rise. "The growth rate of poverty in Ontario from 2007 to 2009 was a staggering 17 percent – a figure that is substantially higher than other provinces" (Ellery, 2011, June 22). With an impending election, poverty is at the forefront of most parties' election platforms. On *The Agenda with Steve Paikin* (Brake, 2011), Cheri DiNovo, MPP, stated that the level of children poverty in Ontario is its lowest since the great depression of the 1930's. Nationally, 3.5 million Canadians live in poverty (Make

Poverty History, 2010). Story is the key to unravelling the issues facing so many educational communities, not only in Ontario, but in Canada and beyond.

The participants in this study share their struggles of living or working in areas affected by poverty. By relating to the stories of the participants, the reader is able to find new ways of understanding the complexities of students, parents and educators living and working in communities affected by poverty. This study uses narrative inquiry as a method to consider alternative ways to explore social justice issues, such as poverty. We have learned that story can, perhaps more than other methods, provide a pathway for a new understanding of school communities and how, as educators and researchers, we can strive to make the teaching community better. As educators, we are bombarded with stories of school and school stories. Story is powerful and, by listening to the stories of teachers and the lived experiences of students, educators can learn from each other and improve their professional practice in meaningful ways. In a news article by Ferguson (2011, August 31), Connelly states “The single most important factor in student achievement that we can do something about is the quality of the teachers”. One way the quality of teachers can be improved is by listening to the stories of other educators, such as myself, Ms. Breanne, Ms. Thomas, and Mr. Baxter and to reconcile their stories with those of our own. This kind of relational knowing, then, might offer alternative perspective on the lives children and families live, and how teachers’ quality of teaching affects the learning of students in such communities.

### **Limitations and Further Implications**

There are limitations to the scope of this project. Most narrative studies are longitudinal, whereas this one was not. Although the passage of time and reflection on

the temporality (Clandinin, 2006) of the subject matter influences this study, follow up with the participants and further conversations would add to the depth, breadth, and versatility of the findings. Second, as mentioned in previous chapters, my subjectivity as both researcher and participant may have been compromised during the interview with my parents. Due to the in-depth and personal relationship developed over the course of my life time, it seems impossible to erase our prior experiences for the sake of this study.

A possible extension to this study or subject for further investigation would be to engage in in-depth storied practice with people at the school where I work. There could be great value in collecting stories from fellow teachers, students, as well as from members of the surrounding community. Alternatively, further follow-up with the participants of this study, including an observation of Ms. Breanne's classroom interaction, could add value to this study. Overall, increased follow-up with any or all of the participants would help me gain an even deeper understanding of the phenomena of the study, which could be applied to my own teaching and perhaps to other teachers' professional development as well. Each of the themes of this study could become the focus of a more in-depth study, with a variety of participants weighing in on the same issue. From these extended studies I could gather additional knowledge to improve my professional practice, and share the findings with other educators as well.

### **Conclusion**

I am still continuing to learn about teachers, such as myself, who are working in challenging circumstances—not just locally or provincially, but internationally as well. Based on my research for this thesis, as well as on information I have gathered from talks I have attended from work with international scholars on issues of poverty and education,

and with the current work by Ciuffetelli Parker and Flessa (2011) on poverty in schools in Canada, I believe this thesis can expand on the international literature and that it can have implications for teachers working in marginalised communities across Canada and the globe. Whether teachers and students are working together in Ontario, elsewhere in Canada, or internationally, issues associated with poverty remain a constant. Teachers can use the lessons learned in this thesis through the themes of student authorship, teaching practice, and community involvement to strengthen their own teaching, as well as anchor their practices in such a way as to best help their students achieve their goals and enjoy their learning experiences in the communities in which they live.

In this study I have explored, through story, the effect of poverty on education and I have uncovered themes presented through the stories of the participants and how those experiences have shaped my professional practice. This journey of discovery began long before this research project, where as a newly qualified, unemployed teacher I stumbled into a research assistant position that would forever alter my life. I have learned of the importance of listening to students and student authorship, the importance of upholding the standards of professional practice and good teaching as well as how rewarding for all parties' community involvement and engagement can be. I plan to continue my journey through education, and use the lessons learned from this project to improve my own teaching practices, as well as share the results of this project with other educators in hopes that they will also find the themes valuable to their practice.

Ciuffetelli Parker and Flessa (2011) tell us that, "Teachers' work is shaped, supported, and limited by the policies and practices of multiple stakeholders. Teachers are the core of the education system" (p. 105). Through this project, I have come to

understand that teaching can, and should be, more than just a job. The over-reaching impacts and implications of my professional practice can have a widespread effect.

McFadden and Munns (2002) state that,

Even in the most educationally disadvantaged communities there might still be a hope that students will come to believe that 'school is for me,' and so have a chance that education can become a positive and productive resource in their current and future lives. (p. 170)

As a teacher, I will strive to do my best to help students believe that school is for me and help them to discover the joys of education as I have experienced it as well as help them find their own paths.

As I reflect on my role as a teacher, I feel that although I have learned a lot, there is still much to learn. I always look for ways to improve my teaching practice, as well as improve the school community where I am working. McFadden and Munns (2002) share that there are teachers who can contribute strongly to the improvement of the educational and life circumstances of their children and thus positively contribute to their community's well-being. The link between a student's success and positive experiences at school and the overall effect on the community can be easily overlooked. Likewise, as a teacher, it is important for me to remember that I can make a difference in students' lives, which could directly affect their future, and the overall well-being of the community. Also, if several teachers work together, Munns, Zammit and Woodward (2008) tell us that schools can take up a different and supportive view of the people who live around them. They continue by saying that, by rejecting deficit discourses, the school can attempt to make a real difference in the education of its students (p. 158).

Although it is unlikely I will remain at my current location for the remainder of my teaching career, I know that whatever community I teach in, the lessons I have learned from this experience are something I can forever take with me and continue to build upon. As a researcher, this study has inspired to continue on my educational path and seek additional answers to the questions left unanswered in this project.



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## Appendix A

### Letter of Invitation

#### An Invitation for you!

I would like to begin, by sharing a story with you.

*I am in Grade 7, and I'm sitting in my desk. It's right beside the window, which I like. My best friend Callie is sitting in front of me. Every once and a while she turns around and we talk - this is about the only thing either of us ever get in trouble for. We are quietly working on our assigned work when Mrs. Flounder asks Keith to step into the hallway. She talks to him quietly for a while, and then they both return. Keith is holding a bar of deodorant, which he puts in his desk - although he is not afraid to let everyone see it. Keith always comes to school dirty - smelling of the pig farm where he lives. He is not a good student. All he ever talks about is various aspects of farming. Although half the class lives on a farm, it's not often a topic of conversation. We all know what happened. Mrs. Flounder knew he lacked a level of hygiene that is expected in a public place like school, and tried to help him out.*

*Reflecting on this memory as a teacher - I wonder if I would have done the same thing. Several students in my class do not have adequate hygiene - and they are either ignored, or sent to the school nurse (who visits one day every other week). One particular student comes to mind - Will. Will comes to school reeking of cigarette smoke. His hands and face are always dirty. I have read through his records know that hygiene is the very least of his problems. His mother is severely alcoholic, and the Child's Aid Society (CAS) is always involved in their family. Will's older brothers dropped out of school, and began drinking very early. They're often seen drunk in the park across the street. One of his brothers has returned to high school in an alternative, off-site programme in order to get his high school diploma. It is this brother that tries to get Will to school - but between his own problems, school and work schedules - he is not always successful.*

*Unlike Mrs. Flounder I never took the time to help Will get himself cleaned up. In my mind, I justify it by saying this is the difference between elementary and high school. In high school, students are supposed to be self sufficient. High school teachers refer students to the appropriate counsellor and move on. I worry that I would have only embarrassed him, or he would have been resentful of my help. I wish I would have taken a chance, and reached out to help him.*

I have shared this story with you, in hopes that you will consider sharing your stories with me. For me, this story represents how I see myself as a teacher – and one way I hope to grow as a professional.

I would like to invite you to participate in a research project entitled *Stories of experience in rural education: Exploring the implication for a community.*

The purpose of this study is to use stories to explore my formative elementary education, growing up in a rural community, and the impact and implications these experiences have had on my current teaching practice.

Your participation in this study is two-fold. First, I would like you to write down three memories that you feel are representative of your experience as a student, parent or teacher living and working with Normanby Community School. Think of stories that you feel are representative of pivotal moments in your education, or stories that are representative of the community.

Second, I would like to arrange a time to meet with you and discuss the stories you have chosen to share with me.

I expect our meeting to last about an hour.

If you have any pertinent questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Brock University Research Ethics Officer (905 688-5550 ext 3035, [reb@brocku.ca](mailto:reb@brocku.ca))

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me.

Thank you,

Heather

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This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through Brock University's Research Ethics Board (file # 09-274)

## **Appendix B**

### **Informed Consent Letter**

Date: December 7, 2011

Project Title: Reflections and Impact of Challenging Circumstances on School Stories

Student Principal Investigator:  
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#### ***INVITATION***

You are invited to participate in a study that involves research. The purpose of this study is to use stories to explore the researcher's formative elementary education, growing up in a community that was experiencing poverty and the impact and implications these experiences have had on her current teaching practice. She will ask potential participants, such as yourself to re-tell and re-live their stories of living and working in areas affected by challenging circumstances.

Specifically, my research question is "What stories emerge from the researcher's childhood and from other participants that explore issues of challenging circumstances, such as poverty?"

#### ***WHAT'S INVOLVED***

As a participant, you will be asked to participate in an interview with the researcher. This interview will be audio taped and recorded. During the interview, you will be asked to reflect, and share memories of your life, living, working and raising a family in an area affected by challenging circumstances. Participation will take approximately one hour of your time.

#### ***POTENTIAL BENEFITS AND RISKS***

Possible benefits of participation include the opportunity to participate in a research study, as well as explore and share memories of your life. Due to your relationship with the researcher, you may be identified to those who read the resulting publications of this study. Also, sensitive issues and topics may be approached which may make you uncomfortable. Please understand that you are under no obligation to participate or answer questions that you are not comfortable with.

#### ***CONFIDENTIALITY***

The information you provide will be kept confidential. Your name will not appear in any thesis or report resulting from this study; however, with your permission, quotations may be used. Anonymity is not possible because you will be identified as the

researcher's parents. Please do not disclose any information you would not wish to be published. Shortly after the interview has been completed, I will send you a copy of the transcript to give you an opportunity to confirm the accuracy of our conversation and to add or clarify any points that you wish. Data collected during this study will be stored securely at the home of the researcher. Data will be kept for 5 years after which time it will be destroyed. Access to this data will be restricted to the researcher, and her faculty supervisor.

#### ***VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION***

Participation in this study is voluntary. Do not feel obligated to participate in this study based on your relationship with the researcher. If you wish, you may decline to answer any questions or participate in any component of the study. Further, you may decide to withdraw from this study at any time and may do so without any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are entitled.

#### ***PUBLICATION OF RESULTS***

Results of this study may be published as a Master's thesis, in professional journals and presented at conferences. Feedback about this study will be available from the researcher at the time of completion.

#### ***CONTACT INFORMATION AND ETHICS CLEARANCE***

If you have any questions about this study or require further information, please contact the Principal Investigator or the Faculty Supervisor using the contact information provided above. This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through the Research Ethics Board at Brock University (REB#09-274). If you have any comments or concerns about your rights as a research participant, please contact the Research Ethics Office at (905) 688-5550 Ext. 3035, reb@brocku.ca.

Thank you for your assistance in this project. Please keep a copy of this form for your records.

#### **CONSENT FORM**

I agree to participate in this study described above. I have made this decision based on the information I have read in the Information-Consent Letter. I have had the opportunity to receive any additional details I wanted about the study and understand that I may ask questions in the future. I understand that I may withdraw this consent at any time.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_



## Appendix C

### Samples of Stories of Education

1. *I am in Grade 7, and I'm sitting in my desk. It's right beside the window, which I like. My best friend C\_\_\_\_ is sitting in front of me. Every once and a while she turns around and we talk – this is about the only thing either of us ever get in trouble for. We are quietly working on our assigned work when Mrs. F\_\_\_\_ asks Kevin to step into the hallway. She talks to him quietly for a while, then they both return. Kevin is holding a bar of deodorant, which he puts in his desk – although he is not afraid to let everyone see it. Kevin always comes to school dirty – smelling of the pig farm where he lives. He is not a good student. No one wants to be in his group – he stinks, doesn't do his school work, and everyone thinks he's weird. All he ever talks about is various aspects of farming. Although half the class lives on a farm, it's not often a topic of conversation. We all know what happened. Mrs. F\_\_\_\_ knew he needed lacked a level of hygiene that is expected in a public place like school, and tried to help him out.*

*Reflecting on this memory as a teacher – I wonder if I would have done the same thing. Several students do not have adequate hygiene – and they are either ignored, or sent to the school nurse (who visits one day every other week). One particular student comes to mind – Will. Will comes to school reeking of cigarette smoke. His hands and face are always dirty. I have read his OSR, and his IEP and know that hygiene is the very least of his problems. His mother is severely alcoholic, and CAS is always involved in their family. Will's older brothers dropped out of school, and began drinking very early. They're often seen drunk in the park. One of his brothers has returned to high school in an alternative, off-site programme in order to get his high school diploma. It is this brother that tries to get Will to school – but between his own problems, school and work schedules – he is not always successful.*

*Unlike Mrs. F\_\_\_\_ I never took the time to help Will get himself cleaned up. In my mind, I justify it by saying this is the difference between elementary and high school. In high school, students are supposed to be self sufficient. High school teachers refer students to the appropriate counsellor and move on. I worry that I would have only embarrassed him, or he would have been resentful of my help. I wish I would have taken a chance, and reached out to help him.*

2. *It's late June, in my eighth Grade year. It's graduation night. Everyone arrives with their parents, dressed up like we've never seen each other before. I am valedictorian.*

*I was surprised when I was asked, because I know there are students with better marks, or students who are more popular than me – but I was proud to be chosen, but nervous to make my speech. In the hall by the office are the trophies that will be given out tonight, with the names of past winners – a boy and girl for each award (math, science, English etc). By the end of the night, the awards are done. A strange thing happened– for most of the awards only one was given out – always to a girl. We later find out that the boys in our class were so low-achieving academically that if their mark was not within 20% of the top female, an award was not given out.*

3. *Every year, the Grade 8's go on a year-end trip to Ottawa. We started planning in September – forms and information were sent home. Soon, we began hearing that unless more of us signed up, we wouldn't be going. It was an expensive trip – a couple hundred dollars, and many families couldn't afford it. In the end we ended up going for only 1 night, and only to Toronto. For many, it was still as far away from their families as they had gone – for me it wasn't that much of a disappointment. My parents had taken us to Ottawa a number of times before.*

## Appendix D

### Interview Guiding Questions

#### Background Questions - Teacher

- Describe the community surrounding Normanby Community School.
- What kinds of challenges are faced by members of this community?
- Describe the community of parents you work with.
- How is teaching in this community different than teaching elsewhere?
- How are students in this community different than in other communities?
- Do you think many students are aware of the challenges this community is facing, including issues of poverty?

#### Background Questions - Parents & Classmate

- Describe the community in which you live
- What kinds of challenges are faced by members of the community in which you live?
- Growing up in this community, did you know people (or perhaps yourself) were experiencing socio-economic challenges? Can you tell a story that illustrates this?
- Did you try to isolate your children or as a child did you feel isolated from the struggles experienced by other members of the community?
- Do you feel you were better off financially than other families? Why or why not?
- Do you feel the challenges of this community are the same as they were when I was a child (20 years ago)? If you feel they have changed, can you describe what is different now?

#### Questions about the stories

1. Why did you choose to share this story?
2. What does this story represent to you, or how is this story representative of the community?
3. As you think about this story, how does it make you feel? What (if any) emotions does it trigger for you?



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## Appendix E

### Brock University Research Ethics Board Clearance Letter

DATE: 6/21/2010

FROM: Michelle McGinn, Chair  
Research Ethics Board (REB) 

TO: Darlene Ciuffetelli-Parker, Education  
Heather Grenville

FILE: 09-274 CIUFFETELLI-PARKER  
Masters Thesis/Project

TITLE: Reflections and Impact of Challenging Circumstances on School Stories

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The Brock University Research Ethics Board has reviewed the above research proposal.

**DECISION:** Accepted as clarified

This project has received ethics clearance for the period of **June 21, 2010 to May 1, 2011** subject to full REB ratification at the Research Ethics Board's next scheduled meeting. The clearance period may be extended upon request. ***The study may now proceed.***

Please note that the Research Ethics Board (REB) requires that you adhere to the protocol as last reviewed and cleared by the REB. During the course of research no deviations from, or changes to, the protocol, recruitment, or consent form may be initiated without prior written clearance from the REB. The Board must provide clearance for any modifications before they can be implemented. If you wish to modify your research project, please refer to <http://www.brocku.ca/research/policies-and-forms/forms> to complete the appropriate form Revision or Modification to an Ongoing Application.

Adverse or unexpected events must be reported to the REB as soon as possible with an indication of how these events affect, in the view of the Principal Investigator, the safety of the participants and the continuation of the protocol.

If research participants are in the care of a health facility, at a school, or other institution or community organization, it is the responsibility of the Principal Investigator to ensure that the ethical guidelines and clearance of those facilities or institutions are obtained and filed with the REB prior to the initiation of any research protocols.

The Tri-Council Policy Statement requires that ongoing research be monitored. A Final Report is required for all projects upon completion of the project. Researchers with projects lasting more than one year are required to submit a Continuing Review Report annually. The Office of Research Services will contact you when this form *Continuing Review/Final Report* is required.

Please quote your REB file number on all future correspondence.

MM/sp